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Reality and Postmodernism in the Plays of Mark Ravenhill

Realita a postmodernismus ve hrách Marka Ravenhilla

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Permission

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I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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Key words:

Ravenhill, reality, postmodernism, drama, simulation, identity, storytelling, society

Klíčová slova:

Ravenhill, realita, postmodernismus, drama, simulace, identita, vyprávění, společnost

Thesis Abstract

The thesis aims to explore how Mark Ravenhill's plays engage with postmodern themes and techniques, while tracking the development of associated experimental tendencies. This development cannot be accurately perceived chronologically, therefore what the thesis does instead is to group connected phenomena thematically, while making sure to stress the gradation that is perceptible over the course of Ravenhill's career. To achieve such a goal, several plays have been selected and arranged based on their focus and the level of experimentation present within them. The plays of principal importance are: *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999), *Faust (Faust Is Dead)* (1997), *Handbag* (1998), *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001), *Product* (2005), *Pool (No Water)* (2006) and *The Experiment* (2010).

The first three listed plays are not formally experimental themselves, yet they instead provide a sound theoretical background for the close reading of the remaining plays. This includes especially Ravenhill's treatment of the concept of postmodernity and its social impact. The analysis of the other, generally younger plays pursues the practical application of the insight gained in the introductory plays. Hence, what is theoretically implied at first is applied not only thematically, but formally as well by the later plays, which are treated in the final chapter. Ravenhill's plotlines begin to fragment, covering two time frames in *Handbag* and *Mother Clap's Molly House*, interweaving and mirroring each other. The propensity towards micronarratives witnessed in the speeches of the characters of the early plays evolves into entire plays which are themselves continuous narratives with all the issues narration brings, especially the questions regarding veracity, which correspond to the concerns about the relativity of truth and the death of sincerity encountered in Ravenhill's plays since the inception of his career. In

short, Ravenhill's theoretical discussions on postmodernity evolve into a fully-fledged postmodern space, where reality has disintegrated.

Abstrakt práce

Cílem této práce je popsat, jakým způsobem jsou v divadelních hrách Marka Ravenhilla zpracovány témata a postupy užívané postmodernou, a ukázat, jakým vývojem tyto hry prochází z hlediska formálních experimentů. Touha experimentovat se sice v průběhu Ravenhilovy kariéry stupňuje, lépe než chronologicky však lze užití postmoderních prvků ilustrovat pomocí tematických seskupení uvedených her do několika celků s podobným zaměřením a úrovní experimentace. Hry, kterých se toto týká především, a které budou předmětem rozboru, jsou následující: *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999), *Faust (Faust Is Dead)* (1997), *Handbag* (1998), *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001), *Product* (2005), *Pool (No Water)* (2006) a *The Experiment* (2010).

První tři jmenované se samy formálními experimenty nevyznačují a představují spíše potřebný teoretický základ pro účely analýzy her následujících. Ukazují totiž, jakým způsobem Ravenhill pojímá ideu postmoderny a v čem spatřuje její možné společenské dopady. Rozbor ostatních, převážně novějších her využívá poznatků nabytých v hrách dřívějších, jelikož to, o čem postavy nejprve pouze diskutují, se stává později realitou právě díky formální experimentaci a rozvíjení již načrtnutých témat. Ve hrách *Handbag* a *Mother Clap's Molly House* lze sledovat fragmentaci vyprávění, jelikož tyto hry zahrnují dvě časové a příběhové linie, které se navzájem proplétají a zrcadlí. Téma příběhů vyprávěných postavami ranných her se stupňuje, až se nakonec jednotlivé hry samy stávají souvislým vyprávěním, a dále tudíž rozvíjí problematiku spojenou s nespolehlivým vyprávěním. Především se jedná o otázku pravdy jako takové, což odpovídá tématu relativismu a ztráty opravdovosti, kterými se Ravenhill zabývá od počátku své kariéry. Stručně řečeno, Ravenhilovo pojetí postmoderny se z pouhé teoretické diskuse nakonec vyvíjí v plnohodnotný postmoderní svět, kde realita zcela pozbyla smyslu.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Preliminary Remarks

This thesis strives to outline and study the evolving treatment of reality in the plays of Mark Ravenhill, and thus it inevitably also discusses postmodernism and Ravenhill's rather complicated attitude towards it. Before proceeding with the analysis proper, it is imperative to explore and explain the terms the following text employs. To start with addressing the terms of the title of this thesis, the term 'reality' is traditionally used to define everything that is not imagined. This is often complicated in art, as the lines between the real and the imagined are questioned and blurred. Although one is most intimately connected to the realm of experience and existence where they can get physically hurt, this is not necessarily true for the characters Ravenhill introduces. The thesis focuses especially on how in Ravenhill reality is treated mostly in a postmodern way, what it means and how this method takes different shapes in his plays.

As for the selection of source materials, the analysis will include most of the plays that are featured in the Methuen Drama series *Plays 1*, *Plays 2* and *Plays 3*, though, naturally, some plays will be discussed in significantly more detail than others. The first two plays that are absolutely crucial are *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999); they present a strong focus on storytelling, which the characters use to combat the reality around them or to locate themselves within it. Storytelling in Ravenhill is performative and directly linked to questions of identity. On a larger scale, this engages with the theories of Jean-François Lyotard and others, who observed a growing distrust in the grand narratives, which is, according to Lyotard, the essence of postmodernism. This is especially pertinent in the relation to history and social context, which is the area that *Faust* (1997) sets out to explore. In the play, characters again strive to take hold of

reality that is dying in front of their eyes, directly linking the discussion with the works of thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord. Later plays build subtly on similar themes, but hone in on the impact of stories, lies and various other realities on identities that were in the process of forming. Thus, narrating and performance come to the fore in *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001), *Handbag* (1998) and *Product* (2005). Finally, the warning of *Faust* is realized in plays like *Pool (No Water)* (2006) and *The Experiment* (2010), where truth and reality becomes ungraspable. This is manifested in the way the plays are presented to the audience, since memory loss, lies and even substance abuse constantly and intentionally obfuscate the plot to the point of chaos.

This is not to argue for a strictly chronological approach to Ravenhill's work, which would be flawed, since there are obvious and significant overlaps of the themes throughout all of the plays and, most importantly, it would not fit the actual production dates of the plays. *Pool (No Water)* was made as early as 2006, while Ravenhill then continues to produce plays like *Ghost Story* (2010) or *Over There* (2009), which would then necessarily have to be interpreted as regression to a previous state, for *Pool* could be considered the culmination of everything postmodern in Ravenhill's playwriting, save for *The Experiment*, which pursues the playwright's postmodern tendencies even further. This regression notwithstanding, a general tendency is discernible. Ravenhill moves from a discussion of the specifics, to a subtler style into an almost abstract one. The thesis will be divided into three chapters; this first one will explore the theory and the terminology that will be used throughout the next two chapters that will focus on the analysis of the plays proper. The second chapter will discuss *Shopping* and *Polaroids*, as they provide the easiest introduction into the world of Ravenhill's writing and its themes that are retained and build upon later. The third chapter will go through the developments present in the rest of the plays, thematically grouping the various creative paths that Ravenhill

follows, culminating in the most experimental examples. This concluding chapter will be the most important, working closely with the individual text, rather than with theory that will have been covered previously. It could be argued that most of the core topics Ravenhill discusses are stated already in his early plays and these merely take on new perspectives. These first plays are generally also his most famous ones and their central position in his oeuvre can hardly be questioned. It is therefore fitting to start with a short examination of the 1990's, the immediate context of their genesis and Ravenhill's position in the playwriting of that time.

1.2 The New Writing of the 1990's

Much of Ravenhill's success, especially at the start of his career, can be attributed to the fact that he was able to acutely capture and interact with the specific spirit of the age. The period of the 1990's, when Ravenhill began producing his plays, is often characterised as the Cool Britannia period, characterised by new optimism and a sense of cultural pride, especially noticeable among the young generation that enjoyed clubbing and Britpop. The optimism was brought about mainly by the booming economy, the digital revolution and increasing globalisation. The fall of the Berlin wall could be interpreted as yet another victory of the West and a triumph of capitalism. This was reflected in the continuing commercialization of theatre, which got to share the limelight of the British coolness. Audiences loved established musicals such as *Cats* (1981), *Les Misérables* (1985) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), all being very recognizable names even nowadays, additionally *The Mousetrap* (1952) and *The Woman in Black* (1988) were both plays produced before 1990 and they are still running even today, making the list of the four longest-running West End shows to date. The West End knew what their audiences liked, and it answered the demand. More radical plays, such as the adaptation of *Trainspotting*

(1996) and Peter Marber's *Closer* (1997) appeared as well, however. The subsidised sector of theatre still felt the cuts introduced by Thatcher and had to be mindful of the economic side of its art, adapting to the laws of the market: "Audiences became customers, and shows became product."¹ Resultingly, commercially successful musicals were also common here, along with some obligatory Shakespeare, whose plays always find an audience. David Hare was the house playwright in the Royal National Theatre, focusing mostly on the political analysis of the state of the nation. Well established authors like Caryl Churchill (*Mad Forest* in 1990 and *The Skriker* in 1994) and Tom Stoppard (*Arcadia* in 1993) continued producing superb plays here as well.

What is more, playwrights, of course, reacted to the darker side of politics, for instance the Gulf War in the Middle East, the Yugoslav Wars in Europe and the rise of migration. However, there was also an increasing demand for new writing. This was met most notably, in 1991, when Philip Ridley introduces his *The Pitchfork Disney*, in 1995 Sarah Kane follows with *Blasted* and they are joined by Mark Ravenhill with *Shopping and Fucking* in 1996. One more author needs to be mentioned, for especially Kane and Ravenhill were influenced by the writing of Martin Crimp,² who "seemed to be at once coolly detached, cruelly indirect and also experimental in form."³ Focusing on the work of these particular authors would be more helpful than an exhaustive summary of active playwrights, as these shed the most light on the issues that dominate the work of Ravenhill and therefore the subsequent analysis. It is crucial to understand that Ravenhill is not a lone voice. Between these playwrights, at places there is an evident correlation when it

¹ Aleks Sierz, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s* (London: Methuen, 2012) 34.

² It is the nature of art that extensive lists of additional influences are cited in every treatment of these playwrights. From among the most frequent names Harold Pinter, Edward Bond and perhaps David Mamet should be at least mentioned, for now.

³ Sierz, *Modern British Playwriting* 57.

comes to themes, the atmosphere of the plays and they also manifest some similarities in their formal experimenting.

Crimp excluded, these authors began to be perceived as the core of the movement in British theatre that was quickly labelled as in-yer-face theatre. Breaking taboos, engaging with sensitive issues, seeming to purposefully provoke, they shove realism into the face of the audience, not giving them a chance to escape. On closer inspection, it is clear, however, that this never was just a provocation for the sake of a shocked audience, but a profound desire to introduce a hope of a change.⁴ These playwrights tapped into issues that were not effectively tackled by the previous authors, as Elizabeth Sakellaridou aptly describes:

[T]here has been a relative silence on domestic crises such as the specific insurmountable problems of the new generation, especially in the lower strata of society. What is missing from all the aforementioned writing is a confrontation with the daily problems, the new desperation of the young generation which has actually been the product of an amoral world of brutal physical and visual violence, arid consumerism, free trade in sex and drugs, unethical use of technology, unemployment and a general degradation of basic human decency and emotional stability. It is not surprising that it is a number of young playwrights who have come to grips with this new dramatic, often unspeakably violent, desperation.⁵

These are precisely the topics to which Ravenhill and the others pay the most attention, thus filling a niche in the British writing at the time. These topics are combined with intimate analyses of personal struggles, exploring and problematizing masculinity and

⁴ Sierz, *Modern British Playwriting* 57-58.

⁵ Elizabeth Sakellaridou, "New Faces for British Political Theatre," *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 20. 1 (2000) 47.

sexual identity, often through young characters, or characters that are suspended between the world of the child and the adult. It is essential to stress that in-yer-face is a largely loose grouping of artists, not a formal movement, as emphasized by Sierz himself:

It is also worth emphasizing that although in-yer-face theatre was clearly a new theatre practice, it was never a movement. You couldn't buy a membership card, or read a manifesto, or join a march. It was a network, and the playwrights involved knew each other well. But although *In-Yer-Face Theatre* scrupulously avoids referring to the new writers of the 1990s as a movement, some of its readers have been less careful.⁶

There are undeniable links between the works of these playwrights, but Anthony Neilson, for instance, has even argued against the in-yer-face label, preferring the denomination "experimental theatre."⁷ What is also often overlooked is that the definition of in-yer-face is not predicated solely on the subject matter of the plays, but, as Sierz stresses, for example the 90-minute structure without an interval, real time progression of the play without interrupting cuts and the use of small studio spaces are quite typical material and formal requirements for these playwrights.⁸

While all of this is crucial and has to be addressed, since the label of in-yer-face is closely connected with Ravenhill, it does not precisely correspond to the aims of this thesis. What is more, it can hardly be argued that the in-yer-face aesthetics is applicable to the whole scope of Ravenhill's writing. As will be shown, the later plays differ significantly from Ravenhill's first plays and do not fully fit the in-yer-face label that is now associated with the playwright's name. This thesis does not offer a counterargument to Sierz and his followers. Their position and their perspective on the new writing of the

⁶ Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders, *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 28.

⁷ Sierz, *Modern British Playwriting* 211.

⁸ D'Monté and Saunders 30.

1990's has been lucidly explained and successfully defended, especially considering Sierz's later comments regarding his famous study of 2001.⁹ Sierz's take on these playwrights is pertinent and will be useful in the following analysis, yet it is not chiefly concerned with the issues of postmodernism, but rather with the urgency of the discussed plays:

The widest definition of in-yer-face theatre is any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message.

It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm.¹⁰

In-yer-face is decisively unapologetic; it speaks to controversy, to shock tactics, to profanity, on-stage sex and violence.¹¹ It provokes, in order to shake the ingrained preconceptions the audience might have, asking the most human and the most difficult questions at the same time. It is meant to be performed in intimate environment where there is no escape from the uncomfortable action onstage. Sierz argues that this works much better in theatre than it would in a film, especially when it comes to nudity and sex that are always linked with profound emotion or the marking lack thereof in Ravenhill, which then be representative of the complete exposure of oneself.¹² The in-yer-face aesthetic complements the playfulness and the borderline nihilism of postmodernism well and is the defining concept for Ravenhill's early plays. Features of in-yer-face are noticeable throughout Ravenhill's career, yet the intensity of communicating the issues of the plays decreases markedly in later plays, where he resorts to more refined tactics.

⁹ See Sierz *Modern British Playwriting*.

¹⁰ Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) 4.

¹¹ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 5.

¹² Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 8.

1.3 The Issue of Postmodernism

The thesis is intimately concerned with the postmodern tendencies in Ravenhill's drama. To understand what these tendencies are, it is necessary to examine what is meant by the term 'postmodern,' at least in the scope of this text, and how it correlates to other works that are considered postmodern, or to the present era that is sometimes referred to as postmodern as well. That is because there are two most significant ways to approach the definition of postmodernism: firstly, it can be analysed as a social phenomenon associated primarily with the USA, sometimes referred to as postmodernity in this sense, and, secondly, as an aesthetic. Though their definitions differ slightly, they are often inevitably treated together in art, naturally seeping into each other, and so it is in Ravenhill. The interaction between these two poles of postmodernism is highly problematic, since even though they habitually coexist, some of their aspects are in mutual conflict. The thesis will attempt to explore how Ravenhill utilizes the postmodern aesthetic, what tools he uses and in what way. This will lead to the subject matter of his plays, which is highly postmodern as well, for it directly addresses and reflects the state and the recent development of the society of today. Finally, the thesis will ponder how Ravenhill balances and marries the two concepts, since his position on the issue can hardly be interpreted as unconditionally accepting. If this is the task, then some basic characteristics of postmodernism have to be listed, so that it is clear what to look for in the following analysis of the plays.

Traditionally, it has been recognized that defining postmodernism is problematic to say the least. As Simon Malpas states in his complaint about the difficulties of defining the subject matter, "It would be nice to be able to begin with a straightforward definition

of the postmodern, one that sums it up and grasps, in its essence, what it is all about.”¹³

And then he proceeds with a justification:

Unfortunately, finding such a simple, uncontroversial meaning for the term ‘postmodern’ is all but impossible. In fact, as we shall see, this sort of clear and concise process of identification and definition is one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets out to challenge. In our day-to-day lives, we expect common sense and accessibility. From the perspectives of scientific reason or philosophical logic, clarity and precision should be the sole aim of thought. But postmodernism, in contrast, often seeks to grasp what escapes these processes of definition and celebrates what resists or disrupts them. It would therefore follow that not only might such a simple definition miss the complexities of the postmodern, it would also be in danger of undermining the basic tenets of what makes it such a radical and exciting area of contemporary critical thought and artistic practice.

In the light of this, defining the postmodern can seem an intractable problem. But things are even more difficult than this. Few critics even agree about what exactly it is that they are dealing with.¹⁴

Simply put, defining postmodernism is not a very postmodern thing to do. Clear-cut categories and binarism are the precise opposites of the perhaps core notion that postmodernism upholds: the plurality of equally relevant perspectives. It battles the totality of one ideology, one worldview, but also, indeed, one reality or one truth.

¹³ Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 2005) 3.

¹⁴ Malpas 4.

The issues with defining postmodernism are well articulated also in Ihab Habib Hassan. After introducing an Orphic metaphor for the duality of life and art present in literature,¹⁵ he turns to silence as a metaphor for “a language that expresses, with harsh and subtle cadences, the stress in art, culture, and consciousness.”¹⁶ And through silence he explores the tension that exists both in modernism and in postmodernism: “The crisis is modern and postmodern, current and continuous, though discontinuity and apocalypse are also images of it. Thus the language of silence conjoins the need both of autodestruction and self-transcendence.”¹⁷ The literature of silence is shaped by the negative, as he claims, often relying on terms like anti-literature, anti-art, anti-language; betraying the contrarian nature of postmodernism, and in his specific study also modernism. Returning to defining of postmodernism, it is worthwhile to further appreciate the specific difficulty that comes with the definition. Similarly to other vast categories, Hassan perceives “a certain *semantic instability*”¹⁸ that can be attributed to the freshness of the term, it can naturally prove challenging to attempt to define the era or the aesthetic sensibility that is shaping and living concurrently as it is being defined. The other issue Hassan identifies is the close connection to other terms: “Thus some critics mean by postmodernism what others call avant-gardism or even neo-avant-gardism, while still others would call the same phenomenon simply modernism.”¹⁹ This begs further questions: Has modernism ended yet? Has postmodernism ended yet? These questions can be partially done away with by imagining postmodernism as the text that is currently on the top of a palimpsest of all the various cultural movements and sensibilities that came before, hence Hassan remarks:

¹⁵ See Ihab Habib Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982) 5-7. This duality indirectly explains the two poles of postmodernism mentioned earlier; postmodernism as an aesthetic and postmodernism as a wide-ranging concept perceivable throughout society, even in areas like economy, politics and communication.

¹⁶ Hassan 12.

¹⁷ Hassan 12.

¹⁸ Hassan 263. Italics in the original.

¹⁹ Hassan 263.

“We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern, at once.”²⁰ The terms overlap and imprint themselves into the others.

Towards the end of Hassan’s study, he endeavours to delineate the disparities between modernism and postmodernism visually with a table that perhaps further reinforces the oppositional nature of postmodernism, but it also provides a list of core principles of postmodernism, many of which will be easily recognized in Ravenhill:

Modernism	Postmodernism
Romanticism/Symbolism	'Pataphysics/Dadaism
Form (conjunctive, closed)	Antiform (disjunctive, open)
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery/Logos	Exhaustion/Silence
Art Object/Finished Work	Process/Performance/Happening
Distance	Participation
Creation/Totalization	Decreation/Deconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Semantics	Rhetoric
Paradigm	Syntagm
Hypotaxis	Parataxis
Metaphor	Metonymy
Selection	Combination
Root/Depth	Rhizome/Surface
Interpretation/Reading	Against Interpretation/Misreading
Signified	Signifier
Lisible (Readerly)	Scriptible (Writerly)
Narrative/Grande Histoire	Anti-narrative/Petite Histoire
Master Code	Idiolect
Symptom	Desire
Type	Mutant
Genital/Phallic	Polymorphous/ Androgynous
Paranoia	Schizophrenia
Origin/Cause	Difference-Differance/Trace
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinacy	Indeterminacy

²⁰ Hassan 263.

As can be seen, the table fittingly covers a multitude of fields and disciplines to evaluate the two terms, also taking into account a sweeping range of authors and it comes with a warning that these counterparts are highly unstable, yet they can bring one closer to a definition of postmodernism, while not explicitly providing it.²² It can be helpful to think of postmodernism as a gamut rather than a binary of being or not being postmodern, some writers are more postmodern than others in some areas of their oeuvre, and tools like this support an establishment of the much-needed touchstones, if no universal definition is to be found. Based on the table, Hassan is able to piece together a general direction in which postmodernism is headed:

as an artistic, philosophical, and social phenomenon, postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a "white ideology" of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate silences. Postmodernism veers towards all these yet implies a different, if not antithetical, movement toward pervasive procedures, ubiquitous interactions, immanent codes, media, languages. Thus our earth seems caught in the process of planetization, transhumanization, even as it breaks up into sects, tribes, factions of every kind.²³

Again, even in this attempt to approximate a definition, the inner conflict within the concept itself prevails, this time between what postmodernism *is* and what it *implies*. Postmodernism is closely associated with globalisation, yet promotes individualism; it

²¹ Hassan 268.

²² Hassan 268.

²³ Hassan 271.

delves deep into form, art and text themselves, while boasting the void in their midst, as well the hollowness that marks the whole enterprise; it often tackles the most profound questions of human consciousness and worldviews, while diverting the attention to its play of surfaces and borderline nihilistic irony. Because that is what it is supposed to do, that is how it can be defined. If one turns to the definitions of other thinkers, they all operate roughly around such lines.

Jean-François Lyotard offers the following characterisation: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.”²⁴ As opposed to the *modern*, the *postmodern* in Lyotard does not subscribe to all-encompassing and legitimizing grand narratives, even if their proponents claim to offer a way to a betterment of society or their field of study and so on. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard does not focus on postmodernism as an aesthetic, rather he is concerned with knowledge and how it is approached in sciences. This has far-reaching implications for the study of history, where usually a narrative is presented to elucidate the motivation for political shifts, or sometimes a narrative of development or progress is needed to package world events into a book, and so on. In his *Postmodern Fiction*, Brian McHale illuminates how traditional historical fiction (and, indeed, historical accounts themselves) strives to make these imperfections of pure historical facts as inconspicuous as possible, trying to hide the need for a narrative (i.e. fiction) to give shape to facts, while postmodern fiction foregrounds these issues, it brings the cracking seams to light and demands their scrutiny.²⁵ It revels in contradictory statements, accounts of events that do not match the generally accepted version of history and also in including blatantly fantastic elements alongside claims to veracity. Harold Aram Veesser compiled a collection of essays

²⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiv, italics in the original.

²⁵ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987) 90.

concerning these topics in *New Historicism* and in the introduction, he included a guideline for newcomers to New Historicism delineating its basic premises, three of which are almost surprisingly relevant to the present discussion of Ravenhill's efforts:

2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes; [...]
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. finally, as emerges powerfully in this volume, that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.²⁶

The assumption number four addresses the mentioned observation of Lyotard that history is merely one of the possible truths, which needs embellishment in order to be consumed by the reader, therefore entering the realm of fiction.²⁷ The assumptions number two and five speak to one of the most commonly mentioned controversies of Ravenhill in critical circles, namely that by dabbling in postmodernism, he unavoidably is infected by it; the form and the content of his plays, however critical, radiate postmodernism. For only by delving into the heart of the matter, by dissecting a understanding it can the author claim insight into the subject and begin to highlight its failings – be it within the sphere of an art form (e.g. the careless nihilism of infinite associations and perspectives), or of a more political goal (e.g. the all too willing embracing of late capitalism).

²⁶ Harold Aram Veenser, *New Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989) xi.

²⁷ See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

The connection to capitalism can be shown by Lyotard again, who explores the effects the postmodern method of thought has in the social context in his *The Postmodern Explained*:

Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: you listen to reggae; you watch a western; you eat McDonald's at midday and local cuisine at night; you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in Hong Kong; knowledge is the stuff of TV game shows. ... Together, artist, gallery owner, critic, and public indulge one another in the Anything Goes – it is time to relax. [...] this realism of Anything Goes is the realism of money. ... This realism accommodates every tendency just as capitalism accommodates every 'need' – so long as these tendencies and needs have buying power.²⁸

The playful and carefree side of postmodernism is easily catered to through capitalism, where many dreams can be accomplished thanks to broad possibilities of the market. The increasing inclusiveness of modern liberalism supplements this as well, enabling voices and perspectives not sufficiently explored and areas of discourse yet untouched by the general public. Postmodernism, given its distrust towards centralization and its celebration of difference as well as plurality, is by necessity global, multicultural and alluring to all imaginable marginalized groups. It could be argued, therefore, that it is hardly ever apolitical. An assertion of this sort can be read in Jameson: "every position on Postmodernism in culture - whether apologia or stigmatization - is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of

²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, trans. Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Pefanis, Virginia Spate and Morgan Thomas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 8. Quoted in Malpas, 2.

multinational capitalism today.”²⁹ This is potentially problematic, since the alliance of postmodernism and capitalism can somewhat limit the scope of perspectives, for instance, those that attempt to envision a reality outside capitalism. If postmodern art tends to be, at least conceptually, political, the kind of political beliefs such an art would subscribe to, seem to be at least in part predetermined. Thus, Ravenhill, addressing major left-wing issues, is naturally drawn to postmodernism, which he has issues with, as it comes packaged with the baggage of capitalism.

1.4 The Tools of Postmodernism

A general concept of what this thesis analyses should be materializing by now. In order to condense the previous paragraphs, one final definition of postmodernism will be included here. Terry Eagleton takes up the dual nature of postmodernism that was pointed out at the beginning of the previous segment, offering two terms instead of one: postmodernity and postmodernism. Nevertheless, he discards the distinction soon after, proving that while it is instrumental to discern the two faces of postmodernism, due to the fluidity and the interconnectedness of the terms, treating them strictly separately would be possibly even counterproductive. The opposition of the terms being more of a listing of two faucets, or an internal conflict in an otherwise uniform, can be evidenced in the quote itself:

Postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of

²⁹ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) 2. Italics in the original.

disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities. [...]

Postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' culture, as well as between art and everyday experience.³⁰

Eagleton's flurry of adjectives is perhaps the most fitting way to describe the phenomenon. While Eagleton also does not tackle postmodernism in art, his quote provides some insight into the presuppositions postmodern art operates with. Most, if not all, of the adjectives used by Eagleton can be effortlessly applied to Ravenhill's drama.

If, then, whether in fiction or in theatre, postmodernism is associated primarily with fragmentation and playful unreliability challenging the reader/audience, what are the specific postmodern devices that one should look for in Ravenhill? Major points of interest will be the different techniques that Ravenhill uses to elicit the creation of multiple perspectives. In the early plays, this can be done relatively innocently by undermining the various narratives that Ravenhill speaks up against, but this is projected into the plays themselves that question themselves with increasing force. Starting with simple lies of the characters, which are forcefully foregrounded by the playwright, the uncertainty of both the characters and the audience increases, as Ravenhill is deliberately pointing to the gap between truth and fiction in order to scratch it repeatedly, until it tears open, dissecting it in the process. Characters begin to blatantly question the notions of truth and reality onstage and this is later realized more elegantly in what could be likened

³⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) vii.

to unreliable narrators in fiction: characters that narrate their story while seeming to be lost in it at the same time, not providing, or not possessing the key to the *true* story. In postmodernism, there is, of course, no such thing. The micronarratives the characters provide in the early plays make the plays seem fragmented into individual images,³¹ while later transform into a flux of multiplying truths that wrestle on equal footing for dominance. If reality is to be understood as the one core principle that is collectively shared, there is no reality in the examples of Ravenhill's late drama treated here.

These techniques are all well-established in postmodern fiction and Ravenhill dramatizes them without disrupting the conventional dramatic form of most of his plays. Thus, the plays inherit the aims and topics of their predecessors – they refuse to conform to the conventional conceptions of reality and truth. The origin of this in Ravenhill will be analysed in the following chapter, where the elements defined above will be identified and studied in especially *Shopping* and *Polaroids*. As the characters tend to openly profess their convictions, which are at times ready-made, portion-sized copies of postmodern thought, the early plays offer the perfect opportunity to penetrate the discourse that props up Ravenhill's plays. At the same time, it will be essential to be conscious of how these ideas are transmitted to the audience and focus on the reasoning behind the micronarratives themselves and the act of storytelling in general. The gained insight will be necessary when approaching a second set of plays, especially *Mother Clap's Molly House*, *Handbag* and *Product* that deal with similar issues of reality, even further engaging with the impact of postmodern narratives on the forming of identities and they unite and further complicate these concepts through the study of performance. Both of these types of plays will be needed to clearly interpret the final set of plays (*Pool*

³¹ Images are a significant theme in Ravenhill's criticism of the society of today as well. This can be seen in some productions of his plays that feature an array of different media to perform the script, which clearly encourages such a treatment. *Faust* is probably the first play that comes to mind in this respect.

and *The Experiment*), where such ideas culminate and can be considered as the realized warning of *Faust* about the death of reality.

Chapter 2: Combating Postmodernity in

Shopping and Fucking and Some Explicit Polaroids

2.1 Interpersonal Relationships within Late Capitalism: *Shopping and Fucking*

If the previous chapter provided a general description of the themes crucial to Ravenhill's work, this one will investigate specific examples of Ravenhill's use of these themes in his early plays, which will be relevant throughout the career, thus serving as a gateway to Ravenhill's other texts. Ravenhill was certainly not the first playwright to formulate such ideas, but it would seem as if the era of the 1990's needed precisely these themes explored in this way, as is documented even by Ravenhill's success. The plays that will be explored in this chapter are *Shopping and Fucking* and *Some Explicit Polaroids*, which is as arbitrary of a division of Ravenhill's work as any, yet the plays exhibit quite a similar structure and their aims and conclusions seem to accord well. The central focus is the pervasiveness of postmodern ideology, if there is any such thing, as it penetrates every aspect of the character's lives. Values that should be otherwise meaningful are divested of their meaning; where there should be love, the audience finds economic transactions; where adult and responsible approach is required, children play.

Money and relationships are the primary focus areas for *Shopping*, as is evident from its title alone. This is intimately connected with the broader conflict brought about by the norms of the capitalist society that promote toxic individualism, preventing meaningful relationships. To create new worlds for themselves, the characters of his plays engage in a performative storytelling, which is the blood and bone of *Shopping and Fucking*, where the stories are embedded into the main narrative, always having an agenda behind them and often defining the characters that tell them and the worldview then

hold.³² The play focuses on three also-rans who repeat variations of the same story throughout the play of how one of them, Mark, found and bought the other two, Robbie and Lulu, because they were unwanted and useless. Now he owns them and this story is recurrently used as a symbol for their togetherness. The story is highly performative and it is representative of the world that the characters inhabit, in this case the story highlights mainly the uninhibited capitalism that grips the world of the play. Mark is introduced as a character who aspires to reduce all his human contact to an economic transaction. After he performs the story of how he bought Robbie and Lulu, he breaks away from that story, deciding to leave the two in order to get himself “sorted.” He views this as a solution to his addiction, which has stripped him of control over his body and mind. The relationship he has with Robbie and Lulu is seen as a part of the problem, since the addiction to drugs, money and people coalesce in this piece into a web of interdependency that seems inescapable.

Later it can be seen that Mark is not successful in his endeavour, as paying for sexual favours from young Gary quickly develops into yet another dependency revolved around money and sex. Mark tries to not get involved, but Gary confides with his story about his abusive stepdad, and Mark cannot help but to share his feelings as well:

Mark I used to know what I felt. I traded. I made money. Tic Tac. And when I made money I was happy, when I lost money I was unhappy. Then things got complicated. But for so many years everything I've felt has been ... chemically induced. I mean, everything you feel you wonder ... maybe it's just the ...

Gary The smack.

Mark Yes. The smack, coffee, you know, or the fags.

³² See, for instance, Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2008) esp. 100.

Gary The microwaves.

Mark The cathode rays.

Gary The madcow. Moooooo.

Mark Right. I mean, are there any feelings left, you know?

The coins clatter.

I want to find out, want to know if there are any feelings left.

Gary (*offering two Pot Noodles*) Beef or Nice and Spicy?³³

His suffering and emotional emptiness are here clearly linked to capitalism and the abundance of products that are designed to make the customers happy, so that they buy more. Mark is portrayed in a process of lifting the veil, penetrate the surface and search for tangible and real feeling underneath. His awakening is ironically undermined by the clatter of coins from the arcade where people are gambling their money away and the ready-made meals Gary offers. A similar connection can be made when Robbie gives away all the ecstasy he was selling:

I was looking down on this planet. Spaceman over this earth. And I see this kid in Rwanda, crying, but he doesn't know why. And this granny in Kiev, selling everything she's ever owned. And this president in Bogota or ... South America. And I see the suffering. And the wars. And the grab, grab, grab.

And I think: Fuck Money. Fuck it. This selling. This buying. This system.

Fuck the bitching world and let's be ... beautiful. Beautiful. And happy.

You see?³⁴

Capitalism and the greedy market are identified as the core problem of the world behind all the suffering, against which the audience witnesses Robbie's call for a global

³³ Mark Ravenhill, *Plays 1* (London: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001) 33-34.

³⁴ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 39.

togetherness and equality. Yet even Robbie's vision is quickly undermined, as he is beaten by an angry merrymaker who feels that he has not received enough free ecstasy. It is obvious that *Shopping* criticizes the callous consumerism rampant in the novel, yet in its postmodern affinity for irony, the play is often ready to swiftly challenge any genuine thought that would be offered too directly.

Without the ironizing aspect of the play, Ravenhill could hardly escape the criticism of being an overbearingly moralizing and political writer who uses his characters as mouthpieces for clearly stating his views on (post)modern society.³⁵ The issue is that Ravenhill uses the tools and themes of postmodernism to criticise the failings of a society that is ruled by these topics, hence some might condemn his work as superficial and claim that authors like him are a part of the postmodern problem, while others may praise his ingenuous criticism of postmodernity through the use of its own weapons against it, which is arguably one of the most cogent approaches to criticism. Clare Wallace argues that this conflict within Ravenhill's plays is one of its most compelling features: "The way in which his plays amalgamate the appropriation and assimilation of postmodern superficiality or depthlessness, with a critique of these same features and values is arguably their most interesting and problematic quality."³⁶ The advice she gives is to seriously consider the subject matter before dismissing the plays as worthless additions to the wave of Cool culture of the period: "Criticism of Ravenhill on the basis of superficiality must be qualified and tested against the contexts and value systems he explores and dramatizes, in particular those of contemporary consumerism and postmodernity where a play of surfaces is a prime substantive quality."³⁷ This is only confirmed when one considers the previous chapter, larger part of which was devoted to

³⁵ See Wallace 90 and also Sierz (2001) 148.

³⁶ Wallace 89.

³⁷ Wallace 92.

the definition of postmodernism simply because of the complexity of such a feat, for even postmodern critics are often implicated in the superficiality of postmodernism and they are exposed to the danger of being accused of sharing the shallowness and hollowness with their subject matter. In his attempt to map postmodernism, Breon Mitchell warns: "Postmodernist critics offer up their ideas so modestly, so tentatively, so playfully, that they cannot be caught in a controversy, simply because their convictions are, like Postmodernism itself, often self-subversive and indeterminate."³⁸ This applies doubly to postmodern writers and playwrights dealing with postmodernism, like Ravenhill, who dispute and devalue their views on postmodernism simply, if nothing else, to paint the postmodern setting convincingly.

2.2 Narrative Games in *Shopping and Fucking*

Shopping culminates in a torture/sex scene, since Gary offers the three desperate characters a large amount of money for satisfying his fantasy of being violated. The theme of storytelling also reaches its peak here, as the whole process is presented as a game, where Gary is to narrate the situation, so that the others know what to do, thus essentially making his story a recreated reality. Since he is not ready at first, Mark is the one to start with his own sex story. He begins vaguely:

Mark Well then. I'm in Tramps, OK? Tramps or Annabel's, OK?

Robbie Which - ?

Mark I can't remember.

Robbie Look, you've got to

Lulu Go on.

³⁸ Breon Mitchell, "Samuel Beckett and the Postmodernism Controversy," *Exploring Postmodernism*, Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema, eds. (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1990) 109.

Mark Tramps or Annabel's or somewhere, OK?

Robbie If you don't know where.

Mark It doesn't matter where, OK?

Robbie If it's true then -³⁹

He is immediately met with Robbie's insistence on "veracity."⁴⁰ Robbie requires the story to be based on facts, it has to have a specific time and place, the details should be clear. The postmodern play full of invention is met with a demand for realism. Mark uses his faulty memory as an excuse, yet as he continues, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is little truth in the story. The three characters all participate in the story collectively, bringing it to life together. Mark's story would look quite different had he had the opportunity to narrate on his own, but he is being corrected and edited; for instance, he is pressed to admit that he was on drugs, which he in turn uses to further reinforce his faulty memory excuse. In the end, however, his narrative performance seems to be a failure; he does not succeed in convincing his audience:

Mark What? What I thought you wanted to know ...

Robbie The truth.

Mark Which is what ...

Robbie No.

(*To Lulu.*) Do you believe him?

(*To Gary.*) Do you?⁴¹

Mark fails to create a shared world for Lulu and Robbie. However, there is one character that is convinced and that is Gary: "Why didn't you tell me you'd one it with a woman?"⁴²

³⁹ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 70-71.

⁴⁰ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 71.

⁴¹ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 77.

⁴² Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 77 (sic).

What is more, Gary then proceeds with his own story, which was the goal of Mark's lengthy digression.

With Gary's story, the collective aspect of storytelling is heightened further. Gary starts his story, slowly building the setting and atmosphere, until the others take over and incorporate him into their story, this time Gary being the one who is sold and bought. When the group discovers what horrible act Gary desires, they draw back. Gary's paradoxical reaction paints an adequate picture of the relationship of reality and storytelling: "I thought you were for real. Pretending, isn't it? Just a story."⁴³ However, in yet another shift in the relationship between Mark and Gary, Mark decides to go ahead with the enactment. What is also interesting to note is Mark's final attempt to sway Gary from his path:

Mark *pushes Lulu away and put his arms around Gary.*

Mark Alright. Stop now. See? You can choose this instead. You must like that. Just to be loved.

Gary What are you doing?

Mark Just holding you.

Gary You've not even fucked me.

He pushes Mark away.

You're taking the piss, aren't you?

Mark I'm just trying to show you. Because, I don't think that you have ever actually been loved and if the world has offered us no practical ...⁴⁴

Instead of degrading treatment Mark offers love, but love loses and capitalism prevails; the customer gets what he wants. Gary grew up in the world where being violated was the norm and he has learned to conform and participate in his violation. This makes him

⁴³ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 85.

⁴⁴ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 81.

a complicit victim and marks the character as one of the hallmarks of in-her-face theatre.⁴⁵ The theme of 'trash people' will also be explored in *Polaroids* later, but already here one can see the principal conflict between what seems to be an instinctively good, human reaction and the prevailing tendency towards base violence: a common opposition in Ravenhill and his contemporaries. Though they do not identify with the violent side of Gary's sex dream, both Lulu and Robbie represent a similar category of "trash people." They want to be owned, they embrace the premises of postmodernity, they readily surrender to the capitalist narrative, which is what leads them to Mark. He caters to all of these tendencies, until he fails them and leaves. This represents a major break for the characters, and the stronger of the two, Lulu, sees it as an opportunity to regain their integrity and independence, so she screams at Mark: "You don't own us. We exist. We're people. We can get by. Go."⁴⁶ But over the course of the play the audience sees one failure to find their independence after another: Robbie is fired and then gives away the ecstasy they are supposed to sell and Lulu thus cannot honour her promise to Brian, who entrusted her with the drugs, and she is unable to succeed in showbusiness.

When Mark reunites with Lulu and Robbie, the two have experience with attempting to attain independence, while he has experience with searching for genuine feeling that is not moderated, but all of them are fighting their dependency. Their renewed relationship is therefore necessarily of a different quality as well. Already in the narrative game with Gary, Mark is stripped of control, firstly when his story is unsuccessful and rejected by the two, and secondly when Lulu and Robbie commandeer the narrative of how they met Mark, which is traditionally considered *his* story. When the situation with Gary escalates, it is Mark who takes action and carries the game through. In the final scene the relationship is readdressed again and the story itself changes substantially. It is

⁴⁵ D'Monté and Saunders 30.

⁴⁶ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 7.

moved a thousand years into the future, the Earth is dead, but capitalism is not,⁴⁷ as Mark buys a well-endowed mutant, but transcends both the need to have sex with him and the need for ownership, instead setting him free, despite the protests of the slave who would rather be dependent on Mark. The story also does not feature Rob and Lulu, as their relationship is no longer based on owner/owned basis, instead fostering a more mutual connection, which is underscored when they feed each other the portion-sized ready-made food. This is a complex image, for apart from storytelling, food is another medium through which the audience can appreciate the dynamics of the relationship of the central characters. The play opens with a scene where Lulu and Robbie are trying to feed Mark takeaway food. His body violently rejects the sustenance, as he rejects Lulu and Robbie. Is he rejecting the medium of the microwavable food with its obvious association with easy answers to satisfying bodily and other needs in capitalism? Does this symbolize the aggravation by the power shift in their relationship (for he is the one who owns the two, he is the one who is supposed to look after them, as he promised)? Is it just a part of the drug rehabilitation process? Later, a beginning of a relationship can be seen with Gary and Mark as well and it is sealed by the pot noodles. The medium remains in the final scene, suggesting that even though the characters largely overcame their personal problems, they chose not to tackle the bigger issue that might be at the heart of all the others, be it labelled capitalism, consumerism, or modernity.⁴⁸ On the other hand, there is an indication of transgression, since the portion-sized meals were previously thought unshareable. Perhaps the final gesture can be summarized by Mark's remark: "It's the best I can do."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ The quote of Frederic Jameson comes to mind: "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world." Frederic Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (May-June, 2003) 76.

⁴⁸ See Wallace 104-105.

⁴⁹ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 90.

2.3 Postmodern Textual Pillaging in *Shopping and Fucking*

Capitalism and postmodernity are often correlated, as was discussed in the introductory chapter, and *Shopping* is a prime example of the intricate interaction of the two. Clearly, they cannot be equated, even though they sometimes go hand in hand, for at other times they are starkly opposed. The characters' position towards capitalism can be explored through their interactions with Brian, who is the embodiment of capitalism in the play. Brian is a mobster like figure, he is wealthy, powerful and in control of the capitalist ventures that appear in the play: the drug trade and the entertainment industry. He seems to have an interest in educating the three characters: for instance, he teaches them not to lie – Lulu lies about food she stole and Robbie lies about offering a clean handkerchief, but their lies are unsuccessful. His insistence on truth is another example of how invention and realism clash; he clearly advocates order and the plurality of realities produced by lying threatens that.⁵⁰ This is even more peculiar when one considers that Brian presents his truth largely symbolically by equating capitalism with order.⁵¹ Another equation he introduces is money = civilization and he does so by changing the first words of the Bible into "Get the money first."⁵² Earlier, he interprets Lion King in a questionable way, stressing the "wrong" parts of it and is also surprised to see that Lulu guesses the ending of the fairy tale, failing to acknowledge the primitive set up of the story or its indebtedness to earlier sources. Brian utilizes Lion King to prove his point that killing Simba's uncle and joining the natural order would be the correct course of action; in other words that casualties and wrongful deeds are acceptable if preserving the natural order is at stake.⁵³

⁵⁰ The lies that the characters live in are evident in the stories they tell themselves, but also Mark makes Gary say "I love you," even though he knows it is a lie. This is repeated in *Some Explicit Polaroids* as well between Tim and Victor. The characters at times manifest blatant disregard for the difference between the truth and its opposite.

⁵¹ See Wallace 103.

⁵² Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 87.

⁵³ Milena Kostić, "Pop Culture in Mark Ravenhill's Plays *Shopping and Fucking* and *Faust is Dead*," *Brno Studies in English* 37. 1 (2011) 163.

Lion King itself is a fitting example of how one can apply older sources differently. It is similar to how Brian adopts a postmodern, plagiaristic attitude to the old narratives, plundering them for anything that could be twisted to fit the context.⁵⁴ However, what he is doing is that he is displacing the old narratives with new ones, but also goes against the postmodernity and the creative storytelling of the other characters.

Admittedly, Lulu and Robbie use lines from Shakespeare and are ransacking old myths in order to satisfy the customers of their newly founded phone sex company. Also, Lulu quotes a speech from Chekhov's *Three Sisters* where hope is expressed that one day people will know what all the toil was for.⁵⁵ Again, one can see the immediate irony at work to undermine the pure thought: only a few scenes from Ravenhill's play are enough to prove that the hope goes unfulfilled, Lulu is also asked to strip when performing the lines and, as Rebellato suggests, she might not understand the message of the words that leave her mouth, as she is only acting.⁵⁶ What is important to note is that the lines from Chekov or Shakespeare that Lulu and Robbie utilize tear "a stylistic hole in the fabric of the play,"⁵⁷ they are immediately undermined and ironized, as all profounder messages are in postmodernism. In contrast, Brian's wisdom is not being undermined stylistically or otherwise in the play, he is clearly in a position of authority. The other characters playfully pick up one source as they quickly drop it for another, never propping up any consistent agenda, momentarily creating a new reality. They show as little regard for the original source as Brian does, they too exploit it materialistically, yet Brian twists the old narratives, displacing them with an oppressive definition of his own, through which he views and categorizes the world. If postmodernism is about rejecting simple categories, and aiming towards plurality, Brian's approach is not postmodern in that sense. He is

⁵⁴ See Wallace 122-130.

⁵⁵ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 11.

⁵⁶ Dan Rebellato, Introduction to Ravenhill, *Plays I*, xix.

⁵⁷ Dan Rebellato, Introduction to Ravenhill, *Plays I*, xix.

oppressive, while Robbie and Lulu offer playful liberation. This is where the line between postmodernism and capitalism is drawn – postmodernism thrives in capitalism, as it is enabled by the freedom it offers, yet when one views capitalism as an ideology, the association of the two concepts shows a disconnect. The relationship is paradoxical and ironic, as postmodernism is not constant, nor religiously consistent when it comes to its elusive definition and that applies also to what it should oppose and what it should uphold.

The conclusion of Ravenhill's play is similarly vague, for the development of its characters is curious. The ending is optimistic, as the three characters have succeeded in creating a healthier relationship that has shifted away from dependency and towards mutuality and sharing, thus achieving the goals the individual characters set for themselves in the first scene. On the other hand, Brian's authority remains unchallenged and he even seems to have given them a lesson in being successful in modern society. After all, they are financially secure for the time being, as Brian lets them keep the money they got from Gary, proving his educational intentions. One of the most significant lessons is that the customer has a right to choose, if he pays. The stabbing of Robbie occurs when the customer is pressed to make a choice, which is immediately undermined comically, but in yet another twist the stabbing is replicated in Lulu's story, who complains of "So much choice. Too much,"⁵⁸ and this time the stabbing is fatal. In their original story, Lulu and Robbie are defined as having no choice. This makes the narrative a perfect fit for Gary as well, who searches for total surrender of control. However, as a customer he is able to choose what he desires⁵⁹ and the trio has to learn to accept that. As David Alderson observes, the abundance of choice available to customers is constantly held up against the dependencies of the characters, and hence the assumptions "that the consumer is an autonomous individual capable of making rational choices are

⁵⁸ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 28.

⁵⁹ See Wallace 104.

undermined in the play by a stress on the helplessness and addiction of the characters.”⁶⁰ Characters often desire to have no choice, repeatedly choosing to be dependent. Gary’s choice is ultimately destructive, but in essence it differs little from the narrative Lulu and Robbie choose to live by. Through obliging Gary and thus satisfying the urge illustrative of the age, the trio is initiated; they have successfully absorbed Brian’s instruction and have become compliant. After all, they got the money first and only then were they able to focus on other things as well – only after accepting the necessity of capitalism are they allowed to live happily within in. Following Brian’s bible, they learn to comprehend life within capitalism, rather than attempting to leave.

2.4 Seeing the Patterns: Grand Narratives in *Some Explicit Polaroids*

In *Some Explicit Polaroids* the conflict between small, individual narratives and the grand narratives is brought to the fore. The character of Nick as if steps out of a time capsule when he is released from prison and observes a society in the grip of what has been so far described as postmodernity. He used to be a rebellious activist, passionately invested in inspiring political change without fearing the consequences, willing to sacrifice himself for a greater cause, as his imprisonment attests. Now, he is met with people who lack the drive to commit themselves to such grand gestures and they can be sorted into two categories, as Patrice Pavis delineates:

Nick is caught between political pragmatists (Helen and Jonathan) and others who are politically marginalised (Tim, Victor and Nadia). The latter seek escape from reality in drugs, sex and consumerism. The two opposing groups fail to meet. Nick alone, set adrift on his release from prison, can

⁶⁰ David Alderson, “Postgay Drama: Sexuality, Narration and History in the Plays of Mark Ravenhill,” *Textual Practice* 24. 5 (2010) 865.

move easily between the two and hesitates to commit himself to either, feeling divided between neoliberal reformism and alienated nihilism, but feeling quite happy with his drug-filled, marginal status.⁶¹

Nick is not able to mobilize either of the groups – the marginalized relativize and contribute to their oppression, refusing help, and Helen has resorted to a conformist approach of trying to make the existing system a bit more bearable, no longer attempting to displace it. The clearly defined enemy of Jonathan's age vanishes, leaving him angrily punching at nothing. Jonathan has grown up and lived in a time when the tensions between classes, nationalities and ideologies moulded the life of most. Grand us-against-them narratives that have worked for so long, propelling humanity forward through opposition, now become toothless and empty, as the boundaries between "us" and "them" are all but blurred in a somewhat functional, vaguely defined cosmopolitanism. The absence of the opposition divests him of the certainties he used to enjoy, for through opposition communities also achieve unity. Additionally, the people Nick encounters seem to be lacking in backbone, not willing to make a stand for what they believe in, as they do not believe in much.

The establishment that Nick has fought against is personified in Jonathan, who, similarly to Brian in *Shopping*, represents the proponent of the system in place who holds a position of power. Jonathan too defends capitalism, giving bite-sized lectures on how to live contentedly within it. The confrontation between Nick and Jonathan that is the logical culmination of the play is no confrontation at all.⁶² The structurally ironic and anticlimactic conclusion drives Ravenhill's point about the death of great ideals home:

⁶¹ Patrice Pavis, "Ravenhill and Durringer, or the Entente Cordiale Misunderstood," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14. 2 (2004) 11.

⁶² Caridad Svich, "Commerce and Morality in the Theatre of Mark Ravenhill," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13. 1 (2003) 92.

the two characters are too weary to defend their position, which seem to have lost the purpose they once held. But again, among apathy, disillusionment and nihilism, there is hope, a hallmark of Ravenhill's writing. Nick's encounter with Jonathan signals the ability of the two men to transcend their grievances and to quell the aggression within them, while Nick's newly-founded relationship with Helen further suggests a general ceasefire, or even peace.⁶³ Much of the dynamic between the characters is determined by the attitudes particular characters hold towards the past. As shown, Nick is the audience's guide through the evolution of disobedience into apathy, yet it is the people that he meets who make him change. The character of Helen adumbrates what Nick will become towards the end. She also used to be a passionate activist, a paradigm to follow for Nick, yet she grows up. In the final scene, she realizes she misses some of the anger she used to have, and she hopes to use Nick to access it again. A much deeper nostalgia is manifested by Tim, who longs for the simpler times that Nick comes from, clearly manifesting the self-destructive aspect of such a nostalgia:

Tim I want communists and apartheid. I want the finger on the nuclear trigger. I want the gay plague.

Victor Honey ...

Tim I want to know where I am. Since I was nineteen, I've known that, you know? I knew where everything was heading. And sure, it was a fucking tragedy. My life was a tragedy and that was frightening and sad and it used to do my head in. But I knew where everything was going.⁶⁴

Due to this carefully assembled metaphor, he refuses his medication, because it robs him of the certainty of death in the same way that he misses what retrospectively appears as clearly defined and simple oppositions. It is clear that

⁶³ See Svich 92.

⁶⁴ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 288.

the past is not idealized in the least, Ravenhill focuses rather on the struggle the characters undertake as they face the new instable socio-political landscape. The opposite reaction is seen from Nadia, who in her state of mind that does not allow anything negative in her life likes to forget what happens to her, forgiving everyone involved. Similarly to the self-destructive choice of Robbie and Lulu, she chooses her reality, her narrative. For her, there is no past, only the future, at least that is the way she is introduced, before she decides that she should be more honest with herself: “I want to remember”⁶⁵ is one of her closing sentences. In general, the surviving characters develop a healthier relationship with the past; they accept its existence, but they are also ready to move on.

2.5 Surviving within Postmodernity

With such a subject matter, the play cannot remain apolitical – it surely is a commentary of the age. Caridad Svich links the play to politics directly by addressing it as a play about post-Thatcher England:

This is the fallout of post-Thatcher Britain, and the play centers on the dislocation and confusion of a man ill at ease with the cynical hedonistic mentality that has swept British society at the edge of a new millennium.

Where political urgency and rage once dominated a culture, Ravenhill sees a society passing time, unable to rouse passion for any kind of protest.

Personal gratification and pleasure have usurped political idealism.⁶⁶

The political space no longer occupies a pivotal role in society, it seems to have given way to personal interests, as society fragments into individuals. Ravenhill’s play departs from the state-of-the-nation tradition that has been established by his predecessors, for

⁶⁵ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 308.

⁶⁶ Svich 90.

despite the society-wide scope of such plays, they seem parochial, as Rebellato aptly puts it, when confronted with the world of globalisation that Ravenhill depicts.⁶⁷ Many of Ravenhill's plays are political, "elliptically but recognisably social, even socialist."⁶⁸ They have a peculiar quality of being upfront to a fault with their ideas, while simultaneously drowning the political in casual apathy and playful irony. The political aspect of the plays is surpassed by their morality, despite the popular claims to their amorality, which arise mostly due to the shocking images the audience witnesses. Pursuing this, Pavis observes that "[t]here are moments when the audience are at a loss as to whether they should be shocked by the somewhat bestial sexual actions portrayed in the play, or touched by the extreme sensitivity of the protagonists and of their author."⁶⁹ This has to do with the play of surfaces that Ravenhill positions in the core of his plays. The surface in this case is the shocking nature of the plays, but if the audience refuses the postmodern game, the gilt quickly disappears, laying bare the genuine thirst for human contact and emotions played out by the deeply sentimental and tragic characters. The brutal side of the plays should not be brushed aside as mere incentive for younger audiences, or as tools that Ravenhill uses to dilute the politics of his plays, as Pavis suggests.⁷⁰ It is central to Ravenhill's critical treatment of postmodernism, showing in practice how easily the surface becomes the bearer of meaning, if one allows it to.

As in *Shopping*, the conclusion of *Polaroids* seems to be a compromise of "living on" within the established state of things:

Jonathan [...] But really money, capitalism if you like, is the closest we've come to the way that people actually live. And, sure, we can work out all sorts of other schemes try and plan to make everything better. But

⁶⁷ Dan Rebellato, Introduction to Ravenhill, *Plays I*, x.

⁶⁸ Dan Rebellato, Introduction to Ravenhill, *Plays I*, x. Also see Wallace 129.

⁶⁹ Pavis 10.

⁷⁰ See Pavis 12-13.

ultimately the market is the only thing sensitive enough, flexible enough to actually respond to the way we tick.

Nick There's nothing better?

Jonathan Maybe in a thousand years but for now ...

Nick It's the best we've got.⁷¹

Postmodernity (along with capitalism) prevails once again, as everyone in the play is too weary to challenge it properly. Only Helen seeks to rekindle her anger through Nick, which is, however, just another compromise, making her less “dull,” as she is now able to perceive the bigger picture, instead of focusing merely on fixing the timetables. Jonathan, as well as Brian in *Shopping*, seem to be right. The conclusions of these plays are troublesome, if it is used to Ravenhill as the critic of postmodernism, for it seems that the characters have accepted the grand narrative of globalisation/postmodernity/capitalism and their conformism is rewarded by happiness – they become adults. Rebellato very appositely delineates how difficult it is to defy globalisation:

The claim that there are only mini-stories that we carry around with us, that reality has ended, that progress has been discredited, of course, makes resistance to the grand story of globalisation impossible. It makes our experience of reality impossible to share; we move, once again, from members of a common society, to individual consumers of individual story-portions. Ravenhill's characters recite these postmodern platitudes, insisting that nothing should ever mean anything, that truth is no more valuable than lies, that we should never think of the big picture. One cannot understand globalisation without an ability to see beyond oneself

⁷¹ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 311.

to a wider story in which we are all characters; but in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Tim anxiously tries to prevent knowledge of the world moving beyond the individual: 'Nothing's a pattern unless you make it a pattern. Patterns are only there for people who see patterns, and people who see patterns repeat patterns.' Such thought leaves us entirely defenceless, because it suggests that by changing our minds we change the world.⁷²

In this way, the characters are trapped, they cannot escape this paradox. So they inevitably fail to escape capitalism, in neither of the two plays they transcend it. However, they are successful in fighting the fragmentation of the age by refusing the surface relationships that the plays are introduced by, moving instead towards meaningful connections, discovering lost emotions, loving and caring for each other, which seems impossible at the onset. That is their victory and that is why the endings of the plays can be considered positive and moral at that. Far from wagging his finger, Ravenhill's morality proffers hope in the bleakest of places, showing a way forward for the characters at the close of the plays.

2.6 Growing up and the Issue of the Father

In the previous chapter and the two plays dissected within it, the focus was placed on the interaction between postmodernism and capitalism, and especially on the landscape they create together. The characters had no choice but learn how to operate within such a framework and were rewarded with some stability in their lives, some certainties in a world that is invariably depicted as cruelly whimsical. In varying degrees, they gave up on the idea of resistance to the grand narrative of postmodernity, amending their own micronarratives to fit in the process. The plays concentrate on characters living on the

⁷² Dan Rebellato, Introduction to Ravenhill, *Plays I*, xv. Quoting Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 278.

margins of society that simply live on aimlessly – content lotus-eaters with experiences mediated by drugs. In capitalism, even despite the social situation of many of them, the characters can afford to satisfy their needs and even be confronted with modern issues like the overabundance of customer choice. As Nick of *Polaroids* verbalizes, they lack a great (social) conflict, a grand narrative to rally behind:

Nick You look at me and you see bitter and ugly, alright then, but I look at you and I see ... what is this? What are you? Nothings connected, you're not connected with anything and you're not fighting anything.

Tim But we're happy.

Nick Are you?

Victor Oh yes, happy.

Nick And what does that mean?

Tim It means we're content with what we've got.

Nadia And we're at peace with ourselves.

Tim And we take responsibility for ourselves.

Nadia And we're our own people.⁷³

The defence and definition of their happiness is key to understanding much of the inner conflict within the characters. They define themselves based on responsibility and possession. Vocabulary of economic ownership regularly finds its way into the speeches of the characters of the two plays, undoubtedly through osmosis-like interaction with their environment. As discussed, the characters approach their lives and social ties with an economic mindset, which makes a healthy relationship a utopia. They are incapable of a reciprocal relationship, as they adhere to owner/owned distinction at all times, in which the owner (Mark, Tim) enjoys the position of power, while the owned (Rob, Lulu, Victor)

⁷³ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 273.

surrenders control and is provided for. Additionally, by being one's own person, by taking ownership of one's own life, others are often pushed away in feats of toxically careless individualism.⁷⁴

As the previous chapter concluded, the ends of the plays are problematic, as their characters do not move beyond the controlling structures surrounding them, yet their victory lies rather in learning to abandon the self-destructive behavioural cycles they are trapped in. They become functional within capitalism by ceasing to replicate its values in their personal lives. They move from owning and being owned to caring for and being cared for; in their reciprocity they accept their responsibility not only for themselves, as Tim says, but for others also. "Please let me take care of you,"⁷⁵ says Nick to Helen in *Polaroids*. He comes from an age where he was supposed to provide for his partner, to be the man of the house, but finds a transformed world that is broken up and full of individuals who do not let anyone close to themselves. He and the other characters learn to make compromises, which means losing some of their freedom, some of their integrity, but in a completely new way for them. In the following plays (especially *Molly House* and *Handbag*) one can observe a slight shift in Ravenhill's focus, as he devotes more and more of the space of the plays to the scrutiny of this transformation. The process can be condensed into one word as maturing – the characters at the beginning of *Shopping* and *Polaroids* are children and they become adults, or at least they move closer to adulthood, throughout the plays. The whole range of this spectrum can be seen between Victor and Tim in *Polaroids*, where Victor begins to transgress on the rule of not caring for others and being trash:

⁷⁴ See Dan Rebellato, Introduction to Ravenhill, *Plays I*, xii.

⁷⁵ See Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 279.

Tim Are you taking this seriously?

Victor No, I'm a crazy guy.

Tim I've told you, you take this seriously, you're out.

Victor I can't help this ... I feel ... I want you to get better. I want you to be with me.

Tim That's not why I downloaded you. I didn't download you because of that. I downloaded you because you wear little shorts and you gyrate to trash. Because you are trash.

Victor I like trash.

Tim You like me because I'm trash.

Victor This is different. This is caring about you and wanting you to ... please.⁷⁶

As one has seen in *Shopping* with Gary, Tim is offered love instead of self-destruction and he refuses it. Here, Victor can play-act no more and tries unsuccessfully to reach through the surface game to Tim, who partly admits to feeling only after his death. But later, Victor realises even the further-reaching implications of a society of people without feeling, especially the absence of a future:

Victor There's got to be more than this. What is there? This is ... animals.

What makes us better than animals? Revolution never saved us. Money never saved us. No love. I want more than this.

Tim Faster. Faster.

Victor What is it? Children? To have a child? Is that what save us? I can't have a child. Fuck this gay. Fuck these men and their fucking together.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 283.

⁷⁷ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 299.

Victor goes against the language Tim employs in the previous quote. Victor has not only been bought as in *Shopping*, but downloaded as well, making the connection between modern technology and personal alienation crystal clear and in the second quote he strikes precisely against revolution, which leads to self-destruction, and capitalism, which enables it. He pinpoints the loss of feeling and then touches upon a central theme of a few other plays of Ravenhill: having a child.

Having a child and having a future are often set side by side in Ravenhill. Also, by having a child, the parents are provably not a child themselves anymore, as they are responsible for someone else's life. As Ravenhill's plays focus mainly on male homosexuals, this makes a problematic insinuation of gay males being condemned to being children forever and, given their incapability of conception, lacking a future as well. Lulu from *Shopping* attacks her companions along similar lines: "Boys grow up you know and stop playing with each other's willies. Men and women make the future. There are people out there who need me. Normal people who have kind tidy sex and when they want it. And boys? Boys just fuck each other."⁷⁸ Lulu is portrayed from the onset as more mature than the rest with aspiration of becoming more responsible and more independent and in her speech she further distinguishes herself from the "boys". Consequently, the development of the male characters is more marked and the play puts more emphasis on them. When Ravenhill discusses the commodification of sex in postmodern society, he is concerned primarily with male gay sex that was made socially acceptable due to social shifts which coincided with the rise of the specific kind of postmodern capitalism that Ravenhill's plays are gripped by.⁷⁹ The gay men are depicted as particularly vulnerable to the lures of postmodern society and Ravenhill's themes of family and responsibility offer themselves easily enough as logical development. But the frustration is aimed in the

⁷⁸ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 39.

⁷⁹ See Alderson 866-867.

opposite way as well, for the characters desire to have a father, apart from being a parent themselves. Both of the plays discussed thus far had a male figure of authority – Brian in *Shopping* and Jonathan in *Polaroids* - who educates the characters, shows them the way, which the characters defy. This idea is propagated mainly in *Shopping*, where Ravenhill experiments with the theme primarily through jokes, before the theme develops into more seriousness later. The humour is apparent during one of the many lessons Brian gives to Lulu and Robbie:

Brian Because, at the end of the day, at the final reckoning, behind beauty,
behind God, behind paradise, peel them away and what is there? (*To*
Robbie.) Son, I'm asking you.⁸⁰

Making Brian as if call Robbie his son, Ravenhill jokingly invites the theme of family into the scene. This is pursued further, when after being pressed, Robbie answers wrongly that behind everything there is a father. This not only betrays a void in Robbie's universe, but the answer is all the more interesting given that Brian is the only father figure to be had in the play. Robbie might be confirming Brian's authority at this point, as he desires to play the son and be cared for. However, all this is shattered when the correct answer is revealed to be "money." Once again, capitalism is pitted against family values, which are incompatible with the extreme individualism that is promoted instead.

⁸⁰ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 48.

Chapter 3: Delving Deeper into the Postmodern

3.1 Transposing Worlds in *Handbag*

The chapter on *Shopping* and *Polaroids* has been concluded, but, as was mentioned earlier and as will soon be evident, there is no radical break in terms of the themes that Ravenhill explores. The issues of family, responsibility and growing up come to the fore in a continuation of themes that were already tapped into in the first two plays and merely took over more of the spotlight. Logically, that also means that the themes that are established in the two plays still appear in the other plays, though transformed or with new perspectives. A play that is still very close to the two discussed plays is *Handbag*. It features characters that are unable to care for themselves and need to be provided for, and, on the other hand, there are characters who seek responsibility by looking after others. This is taken to obscene extremes, especially with the character of Phil, who is utterly unable to live by himself, as he cuts himself, takes drugs and wets himself when left to his devices. Assuming responsibility is the central plot of the piece, as is made evident in the first scene already: two gay couples (Mauretta, Suzanne, Tom and David) are having a baby together, the first scene showing them excited about the endeavour, eagerly calling themselves mummy and daddy already; they are a happy family. The sharp contrast to the beginnings of the two previous plays is deliberate, as the four characters undergo the reverse storyline of disintegration of the family, their friendship and relationships. The problem at the core remains the same, however: individualism that is incompatible with any larger unit the characters attempt to form. The play revels in the characters that are unable to grow up mentally, trying instead to do so artificially by assuming responsibility. The audience learnt in *Shopping* and *Polaroids* already that the characters lack reciprocity, as Tom himself confesses:

Tom I'm always looking after people. I hate that. Why do I always look after people? What I want now is someone looking after me.

Suzanne Yes.

Tom Hold me.

Suzanne No.⁸¹

Tom speaks against the rigid roles that predefine each relationship in Ravenhill's world, which Suzanne recognises all too well, yet refuses to transgress on them. These interpersonal obstacles have been tackled in the previous chapter as well, in *Handbag* they are only transported into new light with new characters. What is to be noted, however, is how the play openly articulates the problem as essentially caused by the lack of coming-of-age rituals.⁸² Arguably, this is what drives all three plays – children learning to live happily by the rules of a world they did not create.

Handbag is a goldmine of brilliant quips, images and insights into the theme of societal pressure exerted on individuals in the process of identity development. Already in the first scene, as Caridad Svich warns, “it becomes clear through Ravenhill's wicked dialogue that the act of having a child is more important to Mauretta and Suzanne as a social signifier than the act of parenting itself.”⁸³ The pressure and desire to be an adult, dictates most of the characters' actions, which makes them slaves to societal standards and also indefensibly amoral, as Svich continues to argue in her essay:

Everyone is culpable in *Handbag*. There are no moral victories to be won.

In fact, what is most powerful in *Handbag*, as it is in Edward Bond's *Saved*, is the fact that the characters seem unable to take individual action.

⁸¹ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 218.

⁸² See Cardew's problematic short speech on the subject in Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 196.

⁸³ Svich 87.

They are bound to a societal or emotional place that does not allow for moral action.”⁸⁴

The argument might seem problematic, when one considers Ravenhill’s moralistic intentions, especially in the hopeful endings the audience witnessed in his previously analysed plays, yet being paradoxical is the hallmark of Ravenhill’s writing and one of the core attributes which mark it as postmodern and which enable him to probe the heart of the issue he is addressing. The characters suffer doubly, as their toxic individuality impedes creation of meaningful and stable personal connections, yet they are also unable to break from the collective sensibility of what is proper and how should one function and simply be themselves. They strive to conform so badly that their attempts border on self-destructive tendencies. Ultimately, the victim is the child at the end of the play, as the child-adults of the play are collectively or individually able to keep it alive. Understandably then, the ending of *Handbag* is one of the toughest to be characterised as hopeful, when it comes to Ravenhill’s plays. The characters have failed to tear down the boundaries between them, remaining to be a broken up group of individuals instead; they have failed to successfully oppose the conventions and live happily within or without them; and finally, and perhaps most unsettlingly, they have failed in establishing a future, be it for themselves or for anyone else, as the death of the child so potently documents.

Handbag is a play that could be discussed in similar terms in great length, but the paradoxes and struggles of this kind have been explored previously already, yet what the play offers is a formal innovation which truly distinguishes it. It splices Victorian-era scenes from a prequel to *The Importance of Being Ernest* into the narrative, doubling the characters from the modern era as Victorians, which is of interest due to multiple reasons straight away. Firstly, it reinvokes the discussion about the creative employment of

⁸⁴ Svich 89.

secondary material and the postmodern approach to the well-tried works of the past. Similarly to the materialistic and playful use of Shakespeare's lines in *Shopping*, Wilde's play is used to introduce an easily recognisable Victorian setting, readily bringing with it the themes of morality, properness and surface appearances, which are the key areas that Ravenhill is exploring in *Handbag*. As will be especially evident in *Faust*, Ravenhill is prone to treating his audience to bite-sized portions of ideologies/theories/sensibilities that he would like to summon into his plays and here he uses Wilde to provide a Victorian setting, creating all the needed associations for the audience. As Caridad Svich warns, however, one should not be fooled by the seeming ransacking of the Victorian material and see Ravenhill uncritically as a rebellious playwright exploiting the artists that came before him:

Continually interested in how the soul and the imagination are brutalised by the larger forces at work in society, Ravenhill is not an upstart, as he is often depicted in the media, but a writer working within and expanding upon an established tradition of writing.⁸⁵

Ravenhill seems truly invested in the themes and moral dilemmas his predecessors probed. The material is obviously extensively reworked and modernised, yet the connections with Ravenhill's ongoing concerns are far from being shallow. The whole experiment is playful as always, yet the subject is heavy and unrelentingly moralistic. Essentially every scene offers a few moments that could easily trigger the warning for the audience that what they are witnessing on the stage is wrong and at odds with some moral codex that the play never proffers.

⁸⁵ Svich 89.

The second main and immediate outcome of including an additional sustained storyline is the increased complexity of the narrative structure as such. The play becomes more fragmented, yet connected at the same time, for even though the play operates in two distinct time periods and has two sets of characters, all of the characters apart from Phil double and Phil has the ability to leave one reality and travel to the other. The first time he does that is after he has injected (presumably) heroin, and so the Victorian narrative might be a drug-induced fantasy of his. But later the narratives intertwine even without the use of drugs and neither is Phil the connecting bridge between them. The storylines are not merely set one beside the other, they become one another at the end, where the baby from one reality is caressed and loved by Cardew, while the other is dead in a bin-bag. If the play could be at any point called subtle in its hinting at the similarities of the two ages, both riddled with hypocrisy and their problematic parent-child relationships, the closing images explicitly drive home the point that many of the values of the two narrative lines are quite similar at their core.⁸⁶ It should be noted that the Victorian storyline is employed in a playful and casual manner and the transition between them is mined for comedic effect as well, contrasting, for instance, the striking differences in Phil's and Prism's diction. It perhaps goes without saying that that such time travel, or narrative-travel transgresses on logic, breaking conventional expectations that the audience might hold. This is a repeated tool of Ravenhill's, as he turns from a rather conventional and realistic play that is *Shopping* and likes to utilize fantastical elements, such as post-mortem appearance of Tim in *Polaroids*, Donny in *Faust* and the magical appearance of De Clerk in *Citizenship* that almost seems to be included just to enable Tom's joke "Do all gay people come through floors?"⁸⁷ Though, of course, in all of these cases the aim is to provide a setting for a dialogue with one's consciousness that is

⁸⁶ See Wallace 112.

⁸⁷ Mark Ravenhill, *Plays 2* (London: Methuen Drama, 2008) 280.

manifested through the dead and unreal characters. Ravenhill proves through these easily omittable instances that he revels in destabilizing the established reality just for the sake of doing so in a postmodern playfulness that has proven to be a continuous unifying aspect. Hence there is no reality left that is to be taken as stable and predictable. The effect is still subtle in these examples, but shows that behind the rather traditional structure of the plays, the conventions represented by such tradition are unexpectedly and occasionally broken and this tendency evolves in the absolute instability of plays like *pool (no water)* and *The Experiment*, the discussion of which this analysis is also building up to.

3.2 Narrating and Performing Identity in *Mother Clap's Molly House*

A play that significantly corresponds with *Handbag* is *Mother's Clap Molly House*, which is interested in very similar questions of identity (re)creation, maturing and the remaining topics that are also treated in *Shopping* and *Polaroids*. It directly unifies the relationship between sex and capitalism by placing a historical male homosexual brothel of the title as the centrepiece of the play. One would be hard-pressed to think of a more suitable setting in which to explore human connections based on money. As seen before, the characters have to find their place in the capitalist society, making compromises by conforming to its basic principles while also asserting their independence and securing their chance of happiness. David Alderson summarizes that “[the] molly house, then, represents a rejection of both puritanism and the ‘natural’ order which places constraints on the profitability of sex.”⁸⁸ The theme is further supported by the Chorus and two god characters (God and Eros) who provide interludes with songs about, yes, capitalism and passion. This could again be considered a fragmentation of the principal storyline, yet,

⁸⁸ Alderson 875.

more importantly, *Molly House* follows a very similar structure to *Handbag*, where it splices together two storylines, one from the past and one from the present day. This time, however, it is the 18th century plotline that is the principal one, with the cutscenes of a modern-day gay orgy/party in the process of preparation being sprinkled in between the much more developed story of Mrs Tull and her newly established business. In the end, both parts of the plays are united as well, as the final scene direction reads “*The molly house becomes a rave club as the light jades to nothing.*”⁸⁹ In general, there is a tendency in both of the plays towards increased experimentation, even though it may seem less consequential when the individual little resistances to an easily-defined, logical and unifying reality are examined, the evidence adds together and there is a perceptible shift when Ravenhill’s debut play is measured against the mentioned later plays. Caridad Svich addresses the further complicating of the realism established in *Shopping* directly:

The experiments with interlocking time frames in *Handbag*, and the merging of real and virtual worlds in *Faust* have shown his insistent interest in a more unified sense of realism than the kind of heightened naturalism common in twentieth-century Western theatrical narrative. While he has not been as bold stylistically as some of his contemporaries, with each play Ravenhill seems to be deconstructing the naturalistic conceits of *Shopping and Fucking*, the play that launched his career as a writer and with which he will be forever identified.⁹⁰

Svich perceives this as growth of Ravenhill as a writer, adding immediately after that “*Some Explicit Polaroids* reads like a somewhat fantastic dream that is of Nick’s making,”⁹¹ comparing Nick to Rip Van Winkle. This dream-like nature of the plays is

⁸⁹ Ravenhill, *Plays* 2, 110.

⁹⁰ Svich 91-92.

⁹¹ Svich 92.

precisely one of the key factors driving the shift that brings to the fore the clashing realities the consciousnesses of the characters inhabit.

One has to appreciate that all of this still plays out on the backdrop of the micronarratives and total lies of the characters that are still serving in the same way to mould the realities of their lives. In *Shopping* the audience have seen the disregard for faithfulness in Mark's stories, as he refused to realistically specify the settings and to, simply, tell the truth. In *Handbag*, the best example of a character distorting reality with narrative fiction is Phil's amended version of the dealer story:

And finally the dealer comes for the kid and the dad says: 'I'm free of you.
I've got no habit and I'm free of you and I never want to see you again.'
And the dealer starts to shake, and then he turns red like a furnace and then
smoke comes out of his ears and he burns up until there's just a pair of
shoes lying there and they're full of ash and that's the end.⁹²

The story is divested of the parts that would solicit parental guidance warnings precisely because Phil now imagines himself to be a responsible, adult parent too. The narrative omits the gruesome sections that have surely upset many an audience member and which have undoubtedly had a lion's share when it comes to the controversiality of the play, but which, at the same time, represent the true account. Other narratives presage the events of the plays, for instance Mauretta's story about the child being taken away and then later found in a dustbin. The question of verity enters a new level in *Molly House*, where an early example sees Tull's husband confesses that he has been unfaithful and, what is worse, that he has squandered the profits of their business, she vehemently refuses to let that reality take a hold on her life in the slightest; she does not hear, she defends her husband even as he is listing his bad deeds, appearing unmoved by the confession.⁹³ The

⁹² Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 218.

⁹³ See Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 10-11.

whole molly house that is opened after Mr. Tull's death is a game of pretend that all present play. The characters play out sustained or short-lived performances of crossdressing and identity switching in general, not simply veiling their "true self," for they rather exist through these performances, manifesting themselves as fluid beings that cannot be held down by stable labels. Many of the sexual fantasies fulfilled within the walls of the new establishment consist of such games, where the participants summon the reality of their tales by working together, or by contesting the creative space of the game:

Martin And it's Kitty Fisher.

Orme Her neighbour.

Martin Her maid.

Orme Neighbour.⁹⁴

There is no truth and no lie anymore, when it comes to the games and the identities in *Molly House*; reality is a result of consensus. This has been seen already in *Shopping*, of course, but not at this scale. The characters calling for realistic depiction, correcting inaccuracies and challenging lies have disappeared as the truth is not remotely the point anymore. All the while the tension between these micronarratives and the overarching grand narratives is preserved through comical jabs such as when there is a fictional baby being delivered, though the word 'fictional' loses meaning in the context of the play:

Tull You ever heard of how a virgin once gave birth?

Orme Yes, Ma.

Tull Well, tonight there's something queerer yet⁹⁵

Though the plot follows the identity development of individual mollies, the audience is repeatedly informed that they are witnessing a historic event of settling the perennial conflict between the god of money and the god of sex. It is against this background that

⁹⁴ See Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 46.

⁹⁵ See Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 75.

the personal stories of the characters are probed, as such context inevitably makes its way into their performances as well.

3.3 The Hyperreal and Medialisation in *Faust (Faust Is Dead)*

Before the final and the most experimental plays are to be discussed and their approach to performance and narration is explored, one last theoretical framework needs to be established and that will be done through Ravenhill's 1997 play *Faust (Faust Is Dead)*. The reason for this is Ravenhill's openness about his postmodern sources that are perceptible just beneath the surface of the text. It follows Alain, an academic who comes to America to promote his new book *The Death of Man* and to "live a little"⁹⁶ after an unpleasant incident at his university. He meets Pete, through whom he perhaps hopes to learn what it means to live and how real life looks like. The problem is, as Sierz puts it, that they "both have lost their sense of reality. Compared to the academic, Pete has more experience of life, but his world is filtered through the Internet and video cameras."⁹⁷ They are each other's guides to the worlds they know best. Alain indulges Pete intellectually through his obscure riddles,⁹⁸ attempting to explain the concepts of metaphor and representation, also lecturing his companion on the ideas taken from his academic work. Pete introduces Alain to modern life and all its lures in the form of new technologies, proving that he is no stranger to medialisation himself, though he does not have the theoretical background to prop his experience against. The reciprocity of their shifting roles works well with the Faustian myth of the title, since once again Ravenhill mines the traditional material, twisting it creatively as postmodernists are accustomed to doing, while, as Laurens De Vos explores, uses the same material to "reflect on

⁹⁶ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 99.

⁹⁷ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 135.

⁹⁸ As Sierz points out, the connection to Baudrillard is more than obvious here, see Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 135.

postmodernism itself and to evaluate the ethics and responsibility (or lack thereof) that postmodernist devices have brought us.”⁹⁹ In the flux of meaning and signifiers that the play inhabits at least conceptually, Mephisto cannot be pinpointed to a single character, neither can Faustus, as Alain and Pete represent both sides of the seducer/seduced relationship at various parts of the play. As De Vos goes on to suggest, the sinner of the story is the force of technology represented by Donny’s father: “With his software programs, Bill (Gates) has sneaked in every home, organising and directing other people’s lives. Both Alain, Pete, and other characters, after all, are under the spell of the virtualisation of reality and media-propagated icons.”¹⁰⁰ The effects of postmodernity facilitated and expressed by modern capitalism and the incredible technological advancement that came with it have been continuously treated above, but, arguably, they are felt most acutely in *Faust*. An audience familiar with *Shopping* would have little trouble in identifying the logical trajectory Ravenhill mounts to build on the premises of the earlier play, to stretch the possibilities of the concept to see where it breaks. And break it does, shattering reality with it.

The end of reality is gradually uncovered as Alain and Pete search together for authentic experiences, which are in short supply in the America the audience are presented with. It is reminiscent of the society described already by Guy Debord, in which “everything that was directly lived is now merely represented in the distance.”¹⁰¹ Debord’s *The Society of Spectacle* corresponds with many of view on capitalism found in Ravenhill, so it is worth a closer look. The society of spectacle, as viewed by Debord, has its roots in division of labour, and the accompanying alienation and individual

⁹⁹ Laurens De Vos, “*Faust Is Dead*. Ravenhill’s View on a Posthuman Era,” *Neophilologus* 96 (2012) 651-652. The whole essay is a very rewarding read, probing the play’s discussion of the myth, tragedy and posthumanity.

¹⁰⁰ De Vos 653.

¹⁰¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, Tran. Ken Knabb (Canberra: Hobgoblin press, 2002) 7.

isolation. These factors enabled a state of society where capital has transformed into images and people into spectators.¹⁰² Such a transformation dictates radical changes in how one interacts socially: “The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in *totally* colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity.”¹⁰³ In this way, consumption inevitably invades all the various aspects of society that Debord goes through one by one – culture, history and ideology. Images of things, rather than the things themselves, are what people of the society of spectacle interact with: “When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings.”¹⁰⁴ Alan and Pete seem to inhabit such a society, as the experiences they live through are as a rule heavily mediated. In search of more experiences they visit a desert, which Alain seems to very much enjoy, while Pete prefers to perceive it through the lens of his camrecorder:

Alain This is a very beautiful place.

Pete I guess it’s okay. I kind of prefer it on the TV. I prefer it with a frame around it, you know?

Alain Okay.

Pete Like you know, it stretches out, there it goes, on and on - you get the point from the TV ... but when you actually see it you know ... it’s a little scary.¹⁰⁵

Though he seeks experiences, he is afraid and hides behind the familiar camera eye that creates a distance. What is more, he shelters himself to the extent that he doesn’t even feel being fucked by Alain, as he is looking into the camera the whole time and trying to

¹⁰² See Debord 1-2.

¹⁰³ Debord 42.

¹⁰⁴ Debord 9.

¹⁰⁵ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 113.

provide a narrative to what he sees, as that is what they do on TV; there is seldom any silence.

In the scene following their sexual adventures, Pete is hostile to Alain and says that they had an experience together but now he is bored.¹⁰⁶ This recalls the moment earlier in the play when Alain calls his real blood “boring.”¹⁰⁷ These examples suggest that even though they claim they are searching for real experiences, they are perhaps more accurately searching for real experiences that would rival those supplied by what Jean Baudrillard labels the hyperreal. Nothing can make the blood look as real as it looks in a high-budget gory action movie, no scenery is as beautiful as the ones in nature documentaries or on our desktop wallpaper. As Baudrillard explains, the hyperreal is more real than reality, which it annihilates:

Reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium, such as photography. From medium to medium, the real is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death. But it is also, in a sense, reinforced through its own destruction. It becomes reality for its own sake, the fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.¹⁰⁸

However drawn they both are to the hyperreal, their search for real experiences also firstly marks them as aware of the crisis of reality they (and the society as a whole) experience, and secondly it reveals that they still cling to a pre-postmodernist value system where one can still find something that is objectively true and real. Pete, wanting to maintain a clear distinction between what is real and what is not, accuses Donny, whom he sees on the

¹⁰⁶ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 118.

¹⁰⁷ Ravenhill, *Plays I*, 108.

¹⁰⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, Ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002) 144-145.

screen of his computer, of not being real, not *really* cutting himself, claiming his blood is in actuality mere ketchup: “Just because it's virtual, doesn't mean you can lie, you know? Just because no one can reach out and touch it, doesn't mean you can fake it.”¹⁰⁹ The issue is, however, that he is wrong; the image can be faked, whatever that means in the world as seen by Baudrillard, and it would be treated in exactly the same way.¹¹⁰

As a vehicle to access something truly real, the characters use pain. Pete reveals that pain helps him to establish a sense of reality: “Everything's a fucking lie, you know? The food, the TV, the music ... it's all pretend. And this is the one thing that's for real. I feel it, it means something. Like suffering, like cruelty.”¹¹¹ Physical pain appears to be something that still makes Pete feel and therefore serves as his anchor in the real. Donny's attempt to prove his authenticity through taking his own life triggers the breaking point that makes Alain recollect his own writing on the end of history and man:

Alain At some point, at a moment at the end of the twentieth century,
reality ended. Reality finished and simulation began.

[...]

Reality died. It ended.

And we began to live this dream, this lie, this new simulated existence.¹¹²

In trying to pinpoint the moment when reality ended, he, again, imitates Baudrillard, who discusses the very same event, that he calls a dead point.¹¹³ Donny kills himself to prove

¹⁰⁹ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 125.

¹¹⁰ Baudrillard presents a compelling example of a fake hold up – one can have a dummy weapon, a hostage that is in on the whole experiment and then pretend to be, for example, robbing a bank. Even though everything is fake, the cashier might still hand over the money and one might get shot by the police who are responding to the situation, as if it were real. Thus, the situation becomes real, regardless of the intentions. See Baudrillard 178.

¹¹¹ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 126.

¹¹² Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 132.

¹¹³ See Baudrillard 191-192. Unlike Alain, who readily presents a specific date for the incident, Baudrillard soon questions if such a point in history exists or can be pinpointed. He also concludes that it is vain to ask questions about what went wrong and if things could have been done differently.

that he “was for real,”¹¹⁴ because he had enough communicating “in a virtual way.”¹¹⁵ Yet, his death fuelled a media storm; he has become, even if for a while, an integral part of the system of replicating realities. Pete’s reaction to Donny’s death is markedly different from Alain’s, who perhaps protects himself from the reality he has witnessed by retreating into theoretical ground, where he is at home, not unlike what Pete does in the desert with the camrecorder. In the motel room, Pete repeatedly draws attention to the body; he is now experiencing the real, as Alain was in the desert. “Reality just arrived,”¹¹⁶ he says, in direct contrast to Alain’s assertions. He repeatedly assaults Alain’s detachment from the situation:

Pete Look, just look at him.

See?

This happened. We were there. It was real.

This isn’t eyeballs in a shoebox. The Japanese cannibal.

There’s no ketchup.

This is Donny.

Donny is dead. Donny is here and Donny is dead.¹¹⁷

This is by far the most real experience Pete has in the play. In the final scene it seems that Pete has decided to join his father in recreating the world, completing the rupture of reality, without doubt influenced by what he has seen in the motel room. Bill is a man who can change reality through technology, as manifested by the changeable painting he created. Pete is obviously not thrilled with his options, so he gives in, rather than chooses: “I hate my dad. But you offer despair, you know that? And it may be true, but it doesn’t

¹¹⁴ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 133.

¹¹⁵ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 135.

¹¹⁶ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 132.

¹¹⁷ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 133.

get us anywhere.”¹¹⁸ Alain, the voice of Baudrillardian theory, offers no solution, not even a warning, but a verdict of death already passed. Still, only in renouncing Alain and surrendering to his father, Pete fulfils Alain’s vision, because the system he has on the disc is the chaos Alain talks about in theory.¹¹⁹ Through the technology wielded by Pete’s father, society enters the age of simulation, where nothing is real and everything is real at the same time. This is a world where dead characters and Alain’s conundrums can be brought to life.

3.4 Play as Narrative: *Product*

The present analysis attempted to scale the level of experimentation of the plays in order to build on its own premises, approaching the more complex and experimental plays last. The time has come to discuss the final two small groups of plays that can be viewed as the culmination of the previously treated propensities of Ravenhill’s plays. Firstly, the indulgence of Ravenhill’s characters in creative and performative storytelling with all the associations it brings has arguably evolved into plays that consist solely of such storytelling. An example that can illustrate how this can be done, can be seen in *A Life in Three Acts*, which is essentially an interview conducted by Ravenhill on stage, as he makes clear in the introduction of the piece:

Mark: Hello, I’m Mark Ravenhill. I’m a playwright. In the past few weeks, I’ve been talking to the performer Bette Bourne about his life. We’ve divided our conversation into three parts. A life in three acts. Tonight is part one. We’d like to read you edited transcripts of our conversations. Ladies, gentlemen and all others – Bette Bourne.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 140.

¹¹⁹ He literally says, “This is chaos,” while holding the disc. The association of the disc with chaos is reinforced further and ultimately repeated in the final scene as well. See Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 110 and 139.

¹²⁰ Mark Ravenhill, *Plays 3* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013) 311.

It is a life story, exploring who the interviewed is and explaining how he became the person the audience see. There is no need to dwell on this play for too long, but the implications of staging an interview are something to consider. At times it is easy to forget that this is still a performance – there is a script, or there are edited transcripts, as Ravenhill announces. For the most part, when one would compare *A Life in Three Acts* with the micronarratives and all the various narrations of the other plays, this play offers a rather straightforward narration. Elsewhere, Ravenhill, equally fascinated with the narration of life, sets out to investigate what happens to the narrative when the narrator does not respect truth, creating the worlds of the story as the story progresses. This concept is at the heart of Ravenhill's *Product*, which thus becomes a treasure-trove for the analysis of performativity, narrative and also the hyperreal.

Product introduces only two characters – James, a film producer, and Olivia, a successful actress. What is more, Olivia does not utter a single word throughout the play, she merely listens to James' movie pitch. As James is trying to get Olivia on board, he attempts to sell his project to her by presenting it in as favourable light as he can. What the audience see is a continual narrative that is not unlike the micronarratives in the other plays on a larger scale, as it makes use of similar tools to achieve similar goals. James' movie is a highly exaggerated Hollywood cliché, but it attempts to accommodate various genres at the same time, one off-the-rails scene transitioning with minimal logical cause into another. The narrative is simply all over the place and is at least in part manifestly improvised, not adhering faithfully to the script that supposedly exists, as James specifically lauds it:

I get a lot of scripts. Its my job. I get ... there are hundreds of thousands of stories and they're sitting on my desk and mostly they are, they are, they are ...

The effluent of the soul.

Nobody understands the basic, the truth, the wound. But this script, this story, I - I have been touched, I have been moved by this. When I - I have lain on the floor in my office and wept when I read this script, you see? You see?¹²¹

Similarly to Brian of *Shopping* crying over the video of his son playing a cello, James names the emotional intensity and the *truth* of his story as the main drives. As an experienced narrative consumer, evaluator and creator, James can recognise a movie that checks all the boxes precisely due to its clichés. He has been trained to perceive emotion through a limited and prearranged set of images and tropes, since a good movie has action and it is always over the top, a good movie also has sex and it is always about filling an ache (which is mentioned six times over several lines of text) and so on. James readily concedes that the narrative operates within a movie atmosphere where highly improbable situations are tolerated and even required: “they should never meet again but ... this is the world of the heart, this is the screen, the dream, this is movie-land, so, so, so ...”¹²² It is not difficult to see the connection with Baudrillard here, as James asks his listener to suspend her disbelief, for the representations are far more important than reality. Such a prototypical movie would also necessitate recurring character models to propel the hero on a well-tried story arch of development. The best example of this is the mentor character James introduces, which is important only due to her mentor status and nothing else:

Your mother cares for you. Your mother or a neighbour or an aunt or blah
blah blah. She's a mentor, okay?
[...]

¹²¹ Ravenhill, *Plays* 2, 161.

¹²² Ravenhill, *Plays* 2, 157.

And you look up from the bed and you feel the warmth of her wisdom and
you say: 'Yes MotherAuntNeighbour yes.'¹²³

This is yet another example of Ravenhill's characters constructing the narrative while narrating. They usually have a specific goal for the narration, an effect it should have on the audience of the narrative – here the goal is simply to get Olivia interested in James' project. Truthfulness can be a requirement in the endeavour, but usually it is not, and so it is inconsequential whether there is a mother, aunt or an older neighbour in the same way that it makes no difference who is the celebrity that Mark has sex with in *Shopping*. What matters is whether the story is any good and whether it is successful in what it is designed to accomplish.

It is remarkable how many layers of deceit and representation Ravenhill can stack on top of each other. The actor's profession is perfect for studying pretence and identity shifts, as Olivia the actress becomes Amy the character and then returns again. At times, James uses names and pronouns as if he were talking to Amy directly, equalling Amy to Olivia: "To find yourself, to find yourself, you – Amy - with your wound, to find yourself so at one with this dusky fellow is so ... strange."¹²⁴ Elsewhere, unexpected shifts in reference appear:

Amy - who once lived on coffee and air-miles and longing - Amy - who
never found the perfect diet, never found the perfect man, never found a
therapist she could trust - this Amy is ripped away to reveal a creature of
muscle and will and strength.

You are hero. Before you, we are nothing. Before you, we - oh saviour,
oh saviour, oh saviour.

¹²³ Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 172.

¹²⁴ Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 159.

If only you would save me, if only - this story were . . . there is an inner truth to this st ... but ... it's what we would want to ...¹²⁵

James transitions from clearly referring to Olivia in the third person even, to switching to the second person in the second paragraph talking rather to Olivia, but still within the context of his narration, but in the third paragraph he clearly refers to Olivia's power over the future of the proposed feature and consequently also over James' success. Her identity is as instable as the identity of the characters of *Molly House* - Olivia and different Amys alternate as needed to accommodate the frequent modifications of the reality of the narration that confines them. The tension between representation and the real is stretched even further when James mentions a body double, Beata, who adds yet another level of lie – she is pretending to be Olivia pretending to be Amy, all of which is still being mediated through James. These identity changes are happening without the slightest agency on Amy's part, which brings to mind Martin's Crimp play *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), where the character of Anne/Annie/Anny/Annushka is moulded as it fits the indistinct producers/directors/focus group narrating her life throughout a series of images that use her as a screen on which they can project literally anything. It has to be mentioned, however, that while Olivia says nothing, she is venerated and respected by James, making her position considerably different to Anne as well. Apart from clearly fawning over Olivia and his motivation to succeed notwithstanding, James seems genuinely excited to be able to narrate to her:

Thank you for listening. Thank you for coming here. It's been a privilege to tell the story. And you, if you want to go back to your, you know, manager and agent and PR and your people and, you know, take the piss,

¹²⁵ Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 174.

use the script to ... then fine, fine, because at least I've told you, I have told you.¹²⁶

The mere act of telling the story is a desirable prospect for James. His confidence ranges from utter despair to boasting throughout his story, but in the end he is hopeful, as the play fittingly concludes on what could easily be condemned as another lie: “Loved it. Loved it. She loved it.”¹²⁷ *Product* destabilizes identity and reality as it sees momentarily fit, leaving no original referent to provide the option to certify the verity of the rest; as Baudrillard and Debord warn, there is nothing behind the surface anymore, just a gaping void and a postmodern flux of playfully changing meanings.

3.5 The Culmination of the Postmodern: *Pool (No Water)* and *The Experiment*

The final logical gradation of Ravenhill’s experimentation can be found in *Pool (No Water)*, which mainly approaches the issues of narration, reality manifestation and voice/body appropriation. As with *Product*, identity and reality are in a state of crisis in *Pool* and this is also manifested through a sustained narrative, yet this time there are several nameless characters telling the story. Similarities with Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* mount up again, as while these characters are clearly in a conversation with each other, they often disregard one another, or on the contrary they concur to the point of becoming indistinguishable. They are a group of semi-famous, semi-successful artists preoccupied with their former female member, who left the group to pursue her own projects, surpassing her former associates. She is described as the best of the group, not only the most talented artistically, but also as the most human of them, having no problems with showing empathy and being an all-round good person. When she invites the group to her mansion, they are enjoying their reunion until she jumps into a pool that

¹²⁶ Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 178.

¹²⁷ Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 178.

contains no water and is critically wounded. The faded characters of the group are revitalized by the opportunity to be useful to her once more, as she is unable to care for herself. As she is powerless, they take over her mansion and her staff, visit her in the hospital, caring for her, and they finally appropriate her and her body artistically by documenting her healing process. It is of interest here that the documenting is not merely organic, as they help to arrange her and the settings to create the desired photos:

And the temptation to arrange - just to move the bed ... so ... so the composition was ... get her head in the light, so. The temptation was great and we were weak. So we wheel her into light and actually move the limbs and head - checking of course not to disrupt the tubes and drips and ... science and art can work together happily.¹²⁸

As James amends the script as he is narrating its story in *Product*, so too they twist the artistic object to fit their needs. In this way they objectify and adjust her, exerting and solidifying their power over her, even to a greater degree than James is able to mould Olivia and Amy. Nonetheless, they gradually lose their power again, when she slowly heals, firstly she regains consciousness, then starts talking and walking, retaking her lost agency, until she moves back into her mansion and takes over the whole artistic project of documenting her recovery, hence essentially reclaiming the property of her body. The more strength she gains, the more badly the rest of the group fares: “And she grows stronger every day. While we ... we actually started to feel rather sickly you know?”¹²⁹ As she becomes more independent, they become more dependent on her, again becoming mere guests in her house and mere followers of a more talented artist. They fail to exercise the one-sided relationship the audience witness in *Shopping*, *Polaroids*, *Handbag* and

¹²⁸ Ravenhill, *Plays* 2, 306-307.

¹²⁹ Ravenhill, *Plays* 2, 314.

elsewhere, because the unnamed leading female artist is not lost in the world as Robbie, Victor and Phil are; she is fully grown and her incapacitation is but temporary.

Mostly however, *Pool* could be considered an escalation of *Faust* and *Product*, as it moves even closer to capturing the referential void in place of the missing signified that Baudrillard describes. In his essay on *Faust* and *Pool*, Mesut Günenç identifies the plays as prominent examples of postdramatic theatre, a concept that he borrows from Hans T. Lehermann, which is characterized for instance by focusing on the body, the media, transforming the traditional dramatic space in to a more personal conception and being deliberately transgressive when it comes to the unity of time, creating instead “various, unclear, blurred, disorderly, and irrelevant time periods.”¹³⁰ By forsaking linear time, both plays are enveloped in confusion, as Günenç maintains, for especially *Pool* juggles several timelines concurrently, without clear-cut transitions between them.¹³¹ The play is broken up in more than one way, however: for instance the choppy and repetitive speech of the narration is comparable to that of *Product*, for the narrators struggle to find the right words, fishing for them in their hazy memory, which is not helped by the large quantity of cocaine and tranquilizers taken by them throughout the story. No individual member can distinguish themselves significantly from the others, as they always act as a unit. This is also explained away by faulty memory, as can be seen in the following examples: “We don't even know who first packed the digi-digi-digi-digicam for our visit. Maybe we all did,”¹³² or: “And in the room one of us or all of us - anyway somebody says to her: [...]”¹³³ and finally: “One of us decided to show her the images. Well - I can't

¹³⁰ Mesut Günenç and Ahmet Gökhan Biçer, “Postdramatic Aspects of Mark Ravenhill's *Faust is Dead* and *Pool (No Water)*,” *Celal Bayar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 14. 3 (2016) 237. Also see Hans T. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London: Routledge: 2006).

¹³¹ See Günenç and Biçer 247-248.

¹³² Ravenhill, *Plays* 2, 305.

¹³³ Ravenhill, *Plays* 2, 305.

remember which ... I don't think it was me but ... Maybe I could have ...”¹³⁴ Especially in the last example it is evident that the problems with not being able to remember reality extends beyond the inability to assume agency. There have been characters who lied to augment their reality before, but now there are characters who are not able to ascertain what reality is, or was. The efforts to complicate reality are evidently deliberate at times: “And we did. No - honest with you - we nearly did. But we never did.”¹³⁵ The narrators articulate what they would want to be true, correcting the account right after, perhaps to ease their conscience. This is not a singular example of the narrators attempting to present themselves and the narrated situation in a more favourable light, however, as they are directly imploring whoever is listening to see that they have tried, even though they have behaved immorally afterwards: “And we watch over her and we do care for her. We do genuinely - it's very important that you should believe this bit - we do genuinely care.”¹³⁶ The story is heavily mediated through the unreliable narrators and it would be therefore unwise to take it at face value, but as they have a monopoly on narration in the play, their account is all that the audience get.

If the narrators of *Pool* are unreliable, the narrator-character of *The Experiment* is doubly so. The play comes as close to the Baudrillardian void and postmodern flux of meaning as Ravenhill's plays go, representing the ultimate insecurity about reality, putting into practice what *Shopping*, *Polaroids* and *Faust* propose mostly only in theory and what the other plays pursue to a lesser degree as well. The very first sentence of the play betrays that there will be little confidence in and perhaps even minimal regard for the verity of the story: “This was – I suppose – a long time ago.”¹³⁷ There is next to no certainty of the narrator that what they say is true, they constantly use crutches in form of

¹³⁴ Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 311.

¹³⁵ Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 307.

¹³⁶ Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 317.

¹³⁷ Ravenhill, *Plays 3*, 429.

words such as ‘maybe,’ ‘perhaps,’ or phrases like ‘if I remember correctly’ and so forth. The self-correction that was seen in *Pool* consistently penetrates the text, even when the core topic of the play is introduced: “so what we – we – my partner decided and I followed – we decided together – what we decided to do was to experiment on the children.”¹³⁸ As the shocking introduction moves into further exposition, every detail that the narrator provides is taken back or re-narrated differently:

And we would infect the child, the children with little drops of viruses or
inject little cells of cancers and we – you know through the bars of the cage
The cage was in a film. I saw the cage in a film – a documentary or a horror
Or there was a cage in the fairy story my grandmother told me on the train
journey that time to . . . to . . .

So there wasn’t, maybe there wasn’t – no cage

Because the child had a lovely room. The best room in that cramped little
house. Stars that glowed on the ceiling, wallpaper of princesses, a rug with
a map of an imaginary world

Essentially, no information is given to the audience, as they cannot confidently ascertain which portion of the narration is true without guessing. The more the narration develops, the further is the narrator implicated, as they seem to purposefully swerve away from the possibility of them being the one who conducted experiments on their children. The issue is that there is no tangible evidence for such a reading, however probable it might be. The perspective of the narration seems to shift to the children that are allegedly experimented on, yet even this provides no answer, as each of the twins accuses the other of lying:

‘You’re the one who makes things up. I’m the one who tells the truth’

You’re the one who makes things up. I’m the one who tells the truth.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Ravenhill, *Plays 3*, 429.

¹³⁹ Ravenhill, *Plays 3*, 436.

What is more, while the speaker now by all accounts seems to be one of the children, when the play premiered in 2010, it was performed solely by Ravenhill himself in its entirety. Thus, even the knowledge about the number of narrators is denied. Such information could determine, whether the point of view truly changes, or whether the whole play is a complex view on reality originating in a single individual.

In short, there is very little to grasp in the search for meaning in the play. The endeavour to puzzle out the reality behind what is reported is bound to fail and that appears to be the aim. The play salvages bits and pieces from other Ravenhill's plays, however their true significance can be questioned as anything else in the play. For instance, in order to get to the bottom of the mystery of who is torturing the children, the narrator-character arms themselves with a camera, which could record the truth that would not be forgotten. Given what was written above concerning the spectacle and the issues with representation in the postmodern age, this is more than likely a comic nod to these larger debates that took place in the other places. Similarly, the play mentions that "humanity has ended,"¹⁴⁰ which could be referring to Alain's and Fukuyama's end of man theories encountered in *Faust*, or just as well be merely a signifier for some apocalyptic event. The description of the children themselves also recall principles discussed earlier, but given the lack of further context, not much could be concluded based on this observation as well:

It has no memory. There is no past or future for this child. This child has
no moral sense. This child could not tell you: this is right, this is wrong.

This child has no empathy: this child cannot feel anything that others feel.

Can we really say that it is wrong to experiment on this child?¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Ravenhill, *Plays 3*, 435.

¹⁴¹ Ravenhill, *Plays 3*, 433.

The play offers the ultimate relativism of truth, where all the possible interpretations and claims to authenticity can be challenged. Perhaps the only claim that can be safely disproved is the implication that the audience are involved in the experiment, which is one of the many possible realities that the narration concedes. At parts the unstable reality threatens language itself, as linguistics can barely keep up with the amount of relativism that it was not designed to handle: “And I pushed pulled open the door swung open and through the eye of the camera I saw my partner neighbour injecting the child.”¹⁴² It could be argued that if Ravenhill would like to take another step toward further experimentation in relativism, it would bring him into a territory where language units and sentence structures would have to be deconstructed to accommodate the sheer load of meaning. Because where else can one go from here? Lost in the vortex of meaning, deceit and oblivion, *The Experiment* concludes this analysis, for through this play, Ravenhill has successfully managed to represent the void that resides at the heart of postmodernism. He has shown his audience the pitfalls and the rewards of following postmodern theory by employing such themes and techniques gradually throughout his career, which has allowed him to offer a complex treatment of the phenomenon, building on the premises that he has established previously.

¹⁴² Ravenhill, *Plays 3*, 432.

Conclusion

The previous chapter focused primarily on close reading, providing a number of examples that link it to the introductory chapter, hence completing the referential circle and rounding up the work as a whole. What has been delineated in postmodern theory has been located in Ravenhill's work and by supplementing the theory with specific examples, the indicated inner tensions within postmodernism itself have been laid bare and studied more closely. The space of the concluding chapter will be utilized to make these links more explicit, especially by stressing the development of postmodern experimentation, by revisiting some of the theoretical background and, finally, by addressing Ravenhill's suspect relationship towards postmodernism in these closing plays. *Shopping*, *Polaroids* and especially *Faust* have provided copious references to postmodern theory that has been applied throughout Ravenhill's writing. One influence that has not been utilized yet, however, is that of Francis Fukuyama, who also announces the end of history in *The End of History and the Last Man*, albeit in a more positive light than Alain and Baudrillard.¹⁴³ De Vos applies Fukuyama's thought and especially his concept of *megalothymia* to the reading of *Faust* so as to capture the conflict, or lack thereof, at the heart of the play:

In the wake of postmodernism, all values, principles and perspectives are downgraded by the propagation of the relativism of the truths they claim to possess. Reflecting the interests of either side, truth and untruth become two different ways of seeing the same event, thought or morals.¹⁴⁴

Since postmodernism and postmodernity have a tendency to ironize and relativize any opposition and even itself as a concept, it necessarily breeds apathy and complacency, as

¹⁴³ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹⁴⁴ De Vos 654.

has been most succinctly shown in *Polaroids*. It strips people of their will to fight for the values they uphold, or even fight for dominance; they have lost their drive for conflict. Adopting vocabulary that is politically more specific, De Vos continues with the *Faust* analysis:

This play exemplifies the tension with a posthumanist attitude that has abandoned desire and exchanged it for a life that is firmly rooted in a web of signifiers without any relation with a signified anymore. Liberal democracies, in which capitalism and consumerism have free rein, have submerged Western man in luxury and welfare, and made him forget about the implacable values that had been supporting his ancestors' lives. If his *megalothenia* has been drawn to the background, few things appear capable of adopting a similar importance and being worth fighting for.¹⁴⁵

What *Faust* thematically sketches is a way towards a state of society and reality distortion through the abundance of images, where there can be no rival to postmodern values of relativism and multiplicity. This represents a step further, when compared to *Shopping* and *Polaroids*, where the characters are unable to operate without postmodernity, but still reach a healthier compromise within its bounds, attaining limited freedom and happiness.

The notion of compromise is noticeably missing, as Ravenhill's experimentation reaches its peak. The development is logical, as the plays move stylistically deeper into postmodern chaos, thus representing a grave warning of the outcome of extreme relativism. Of course, this holds true only if one maintains the view that Ravenhill is strictly a critic of postmodernism, using his plays as moral guidelines for his audience of modern citizens. His plays could be, as the title of his most daring one suggests, simply

¹⁴⁵ De Vos 657. See also Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2002).

experiments conducted out of curiosity to see how far the concepts of postmodernism could be reasonably pushed; how bent and how compound can reality be in a play that still manifests a followable storyline. The decision to approach this through unreliable narrators, subjugating the whole scripts to their whims, is clearly effective. It is also necessary to consider that the themes of the analysed plays have moved away from the overtly political charge of *Polaroids* to struggle for creative dominance in *Pool* and *Product*. That is not to say that Ravenhill ceases to write political plays in this period, *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2007) being an example to singlehandedly disprove such a claim, yet *Pool*, *Product* and *The Experiment* are markedly more concerned with artistic experiment and the general exploration of the effects of adopting a perspective, rather than with the dissection of a specific political landscape. Alderson expressly addresses Ravenhill's fondness for postmodern stylistic conventions and the thinly veiled inspiration coming from his postmodern predecessors: "the influence of these postmodern novelists is easy to see, and it may well be that what Ravenhill has taken from them stylistically – precisely their highly cultivated sense of irony – is at odds with what he wishes to convey morally and politically."¹⁴⁶ Ravenhill's convictions have not changed radically over the years and neither has his propensity towards postmodern matters. The three mentioned plays could be perceived as inventive explorations of imaginative space that has been previously left uncharted by the playwright, and which represent at the same time a logical escalation of the themes and writing style that has already been employed.

Looking back at Hassan's table of postmodern aspects quoted in the introductory chapter, it is easy to apply most of them to Ravenhill's experimental endeavours. He chooses to explore the coexistence of multiple realities and multiple truths, delving into what these notions mean, rather than smoothing over the uncomfortable questions, as a

¹⁴⁶ Alderson 868.

more traditionally realist writer might have done. Ravenhill's later plays manage to abandon the lectures on postmodernism delivered through the characters to instead put these lectures into practise in the form of a stylistic and formal investigation of the postmodern. In this way, the challenge for the audience intensifies, as befits a postmodern work, rather than promptly and explicitly offering the key to understanding the plays. There is no Robbie anymore to defend the unaltered and single truth, emphasizing in this way the tension between history and fiction. The truth/lie conflict is for the audience to resolve, as the narrators are unable or unwilling to do so. The task is all the harder, since there are no grand narratives to point the finger at; even the vilification of capitalism subsides. The plays survey the fallout of Alain's prophecy and, similarly to the thinker, they seem to offer no way out, only despair.¹⁴⁷ As was repeatedly shown, however, Ravenhill is famous for dubiously positive conclusions to his plays, and so even *Pool* takes a rather sudden turn, after the main narration is complete, to recount the aftermath. The narrator breaks away from the group, now apparently speaking as a singular person, manages to overcome addiction and founds a happy family. This is made possible by going against the flow of the play itself; by hearing the truth: "No actually it was the happiest night of my life. To have somebody tell you the truth like that ... try to get somebody to do it to you if you can ... try it tonight ... it's really fantastic."¹⁴⁸ Ravenhill is able to surrender political issues, but never ceases to be moral. After the flurry of uncertainty, haziness, obfuscation and absolute lies, the truth is depicted as a liberating saviour, cleansing the narrator of the past. Not a very postmodern way to end the play, one could comment. The truth of the matter seems to be that despite all the postmodern experimentation that clearly spikes the playwright's interest, Ravenhill remains

¹⁴⁷ Ravenhill, *Plays 1*, 140.

¹⁴⁸ Ravenhill, *Plays 2*, 323.

steadfastly loyal to his moral convictions, refusing to sacrifice them, as would perhaps be more fitting.

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